

The
Executioner
and Her Way of Life

◆◆◆ THUS, SHE IS REBORN ◆◆◆

Mato Sato

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Executioner
and Her Way of Life



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The Executioner and Her Way of Life 1

Mato Sato

TRANSLATION BY JENNY MCKEON ❖ COVER ART BY NILITSU

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SHOKEI SHOUJO NO IKIRU MICHİ (VIRGIN ROAD) Vol.1

-SOSHİTE KANOJO WA YOMİGAERU—

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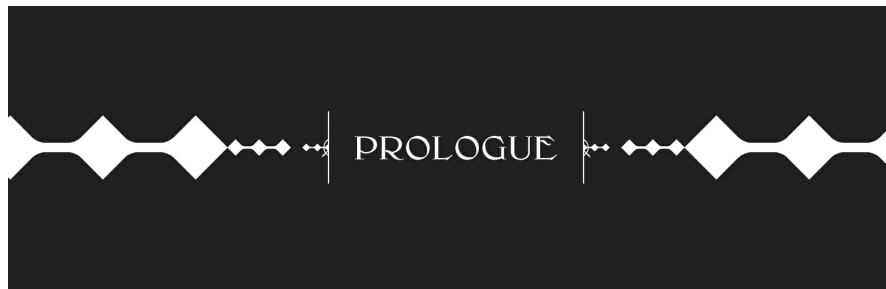
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Every once in a blue moon, I have this one dream.

It's always in some classroom in Japan at a school I've never been to.

Everyone is in different uniforms. There are students in jackets, blazers, sailor uniforms... Even though their clothing clashes, nothing seems out of place for some reason.

When I enter the classroom, they all stop talking and look at me.

It's warm inside—no trace of clamor or conflict. Nobody is armed with weapons. Other than dipping into their studies, everyone is free to spend their time however they choose.

When I greet them, they welcome me with friendly smiles, chatting about nothing in particular.

I'm friends with everyone in the class, but one of them is my best friend.

We're very close. There are no secrets between us. Seeing my friend laugh or smile is all it takes for me to feel happy. And if I'm happy, then my friend is, too. It's because I know about my friend's tragic past and my friend understands my deepest regrets that we can share this bond.

I talk with my best friend about nothing in particular as we wait for class to start.

It's a ridiculous dream, of course, and I could never tell anyone about it.

But it's a dream I have once in a while.

He ended up having to spend the night under a bridge in town upon being summoned to another world.

"Why do I have to put up with this?!"

Mitsuki couldn't contain it any longer, screeching at the morning sun and a

chorus of little birds.

He'd been summoned into this world the day before, whisked away from home right when he decided to try out his middle school uniform for nostalgia's sake. And when he was led to some audience, the guy who seemed to be the king had shooed him away, claiming, "Yeah... We have no need for you."

Two sentences was more than enough to sum up this absurd series of events. It had all happened so fast. With nowhere else to go, he ended up spending the night weeping softly under a bridge.

"I can't believe that king... He could have at least spared me some change. Ngh... I'm starving..."

Mitsuki sniveled next to the gently babbling stream.

"I guess life ain't easy in fantasy worlds, either..."

Reality was sinking deep into his bones after a night of homelessness.

Back in the real world, he'd been living as a shut-in, moping about his dumb luck after missing all his high school entrance exams because of a serious fever, which forced him to take an involuntary gap year. He was obviously lacking the initiative and imagination to solve his present predicament on his own.

Mitsuki's stomach growled, but he didn't have any way of feeding himself.

...Am I going to starve to death in the middle of town?

His hunger fueled thoughts of the worst-case scenario, sending shivers down his spine.

"I refuse. If this is how it's gonna be, I'll just have to steal...!"

As desperation clouded his thoughts, Mitsuki rooted around his head for a new way to live.

"Petty theft, huh...? If I get caught, the police will contact my parents... Wait, I'm an idiot. I *wish* they could pick me up."

"—ey, you. —over there."

"This *is* a totally different world. If the laws and practices aren't the same as in Japan, it might be dangerous to commit a crime..."

“—talking to you. Hey! Helloooo?”

“But do I have any other option...? Dammit! I hate it here! Why do bad things have to happen to—?”

“Excuse me! Can you hear me?!”

“Oh, uh, yeah! Nothing to see here, officer!!” Mitsuki sputtered out of nerves, practically jumping out of his skin.

He turned around, finding himself face-to-face with a stunning young woman. He was certainly awake now.

“What? What’s there to see?”

She fixed her gaze on Mitsuki, suspiciously eyeing him for overreacting.

There was something mature about her, but she had to be around Mitsuki’s age, if not a little older. Her light-chestnut hair was the color of milk with a drop of coffee; it was swept up in a ponytail with a big black ribbon.

“I don’t know what you’ve been plotting, but I’ll let you off if you don’t act on it. Our Lord is generous. Obviously, it follows that I act with an open hand as a priestess!”

As she’d just said, she was certainly in clerical garb, hauling a hefty book of scriptures in her left hand. Overall, her indigo robes gave off an imposing vibe, but for some reason, the slit on her skirt crept all the way up her right thigh.

“So am I correct in assuming you’re the pesky lazybones who’s been sleeping under this bridge?”

“Lazybones? Ouch... But yeah, I guess so...”

“Thought so. We’ve received reports from the good citizens of the Commons, the third rank in the social hierarchy. They begged us to do something about the sketchy individual who won’t stop weeping under the bridge, not even drunk or anything.”

Mitsuki couldn’t stop himself from looking up to the heavens.

Just when he’d thought a gorgeous girl had finally approached him in this fantasy world...

“This alternate universe sucks... What the hell? What did I do to deserve this?”

“What’s wrong? You’ve already cried through the night. Why do you look like you’re about to burst into tears *again*? Someone has a lot of salt and water to spare. Did something awful happen to you?”

“Yeah. I’m broke.”

Mitsuki didn’t see a point in trying to hide it.

There were many other reasons for his distress, of course, but his monetary troubles were the first to pop into his mind.

“Uh-huh. Homeless and penniless. I bet you got swindled out of your life savings as soon as you reached the city because your head was in the clouds. Why don’t you run back home to mommy? Or sleep on a friend’s couch?”

“I’d love to go home—if I had one. Plus, I don’t know anyone.”

“I see. No friends, either, huh?”

She nodded to herself, jumping to conclusions.

Her facial features were deceptively mature for all the animated expressions she pulled. Either intentionally or accidentally, her remarks always seemed to cut right to the core.

“Homeless and penniless and with nowhere to go... I know! Why don’t you come stay with me?”

“What? Why?” His knee-jerk reaction was to remain guarded.

“Can’t you tell from my clothes?” She pointedly whisked the hem of her priestess robes.

The bold slit in her skirt exposed her right leg and her laced boots. Mitsuki also caught a glimpse of a leather garter wrapped around her thigh, which was a near-fatal experience for the young boy.

“I am a priestess of the Faust, the First Estate. My name is Menou. Shouldn’t those of the cloth offer a helping hand to people in need?”

The girl named Menou proudly tossed back her ponytail.

However, this had little meaning to Mitsuki, who knew nothing about this world.

“...Is that how it works?”

“Uh-huh. Do you have any forms of identification? Though we’re allies of the Commons, we can’t be seen lending a hand to criminals. We won’t be able to take you in if you can’t prove who you are and where you’re from.”

“Um... I’m from another world?”

Mitsuki was so exhausted, he couldn’t even muster the energy to hide it anymore. He knew she’d doubt his sanity.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Oh. So you’re a lost one.”

“A what?”

Mitsuki was half-relieved and half-shocked that she accepted his statement so readily.

“A general term for people who stumble into this world. From some land called ‘Japan’ on ‘Earth’ or something... Hmm... Now that you mention it, you’re dressed funny.”

She scrutinized his jacket uniform, nodding to herself.

“No wonder you have nowhere to go. But worry no more. Taking care of lost lambs is part of our duty, too!”

“For real?! Money, please!”

“Excuse you? Keep dreaming, lazybones.” She grinned at him, though Mitsuki could tell from her voice that she wouldn’t budge an inch.

Mitsuki ducked his head, bowing. “I’m sorry! I took it too far.”

“As long as you’ve learned your lesson. Let’s get you to church. Fear not! We have plenty of connections. You’ll be able to work by tomorrow! There won’t be anything like terrible manual labor!”

“What? ...They don’t take people in for free?”

“‘He who does not work, neither shall he eat.’ Ever heard of it? It’s a nugget of wisdom from an ancient proverb.”

“Ugh...”

Mitsuki trudged after her, looking absolutely defeated. His guard had been lowered. Though they’d just met, he felt like he could talk to her.

“Hmm... I wonder what you’d be suited for. I recommend construction. It’s a wonderful workplace that’s always in high demand.”

“I dunno. Seems like a bad place to start a job hunt... Isn’t anyone hiring adventurers or something?”

“Hmm? I guess every generation comes with foolhardy folks itching to venture into the Wild Frontier. I can’t say I recommend it. There’s a reason we gave up on settling there, you know. You die if you can’t fend for yourself. If anything, I’d say *that’s* a terrible place to start.”

It seemed adventurers were a thing here. Fitting for a fantasy world. Mitsuki was impressed as Menou continued her explanation.

“You can certainly make a fortune if it goes well, but most adventurers are criminals with no place in society. It’s much safer in the city, so you should just keep your head down and work in construction. Ah, and since we’ll be finding you a job, you’ll need to donate twenty percent of your earnings. Phew! We might just make it through another month!”

“...Is this a church or a staffing agency? You take a huge cut of the profits.”

“Oh, hush. Unlike the Noblesse, we don’t ask the common people to fork over taxes. We barely scrape by with donations and contributions. Especially the smaller places!”

Mitsuki wasn’t happy about the terms she offered, but he understood all too well the plight of not having enough money.

“Got it... Guess it’s tough all around.”

“As long as you understand... It’s hard enough just to get by.” It seemed Menou had her own share of struggles.

Mitsuki had a flash of inspiration.

“Wait. Can’t I capitalize on my otherworldly intelligence?! Like teaching people this crazy new thing called mayonnaise!”

“I think that might be difficult. Mayonnaise is delicious.”

Menou offered him a pitying smile as she dashed his hopes.

“Lost lambs have been coming to this world for a long time. I think we’ve learned just about all there is to know. Unless you have something more specialized to offer?”

“No dice...”

At the end of the day, Mitsuki was basically a shut-in, held back from starting high school, but otherwise an ordinary boy.

He couldn’t bear the idea of getting stranded here, after he’d felt so pathetic under that bridge last night.

He started to beg. “I’m so sorry for being useless! Please don’t leave me here...!”

“Don’t worry about it.” Menou stopped in her tracks, pivoting on her heel to smile at him. “Priestesses are pure, proper...and powerful! We’d never abandon a person in need.”

Her response was more reassuring than he’d hoped. As she puffed up her chest, her smile was more honest and blinding than anything he’d ever seen.

His heart suddenly skipped a beat. Mitsuki scratched his cheek to cover his embarrassment.

“C-cool. Come to think of it, why was I summoned here in the first place?”

“Don’t ask me. I haven’t the slightest idea what the Noblesse are thinking.”

“Is there a demon lord or something? As far as I know, that’s a staple for these kinds of stories.”

“Well, the Wild Frontier is vast, but I’ve never heard of such a thing. With the current world order, there are no major wars. Thanks and praise be to our great and generous Lord.”

I don’t know the details of this so-called “world order,” but I guess there aren’t any big battles breaking out right now.

“Could the king be plotting something? Maybe weaponizing people from

other worlds for an expansionist war?”

“I think you’re overthinking things... Well, I’ll make a note to mention it to my superiors later. I’ll leave matters about the boss men of the Noblesse to the boss men of the Faust. I’ve got my own honorable mission: helping the dregs of society like you.”

“Gotcha. I guess that means you’re at the bottom of the Faust, if you’re in charge of the likes of me.”

“Can it. I could leave you right here, right now, lazybones.”

“O Great Lady Menou! I know you’re benevolent at heart. Please have mercy on my soul!”

“Much better. I see you’ve learned your place.”

Menou nodded in satisfaction once Mitsuki did a one-eighty.

“I’ve just remembered something. If you’re a lost one, you should have a special skill. Let’s try to think of a job for you that makes use of it. To be honest, even though I recommended construction...” She appraised his physique, furrowing her brow. “You’re so scrawny and pale... It wouldn’t reflect well on me if you end up passing out on the job.”

“Shut up!”

I might not be very confident about doing physical labor, but you don’t have to spell it out. A young man, even one like Mitsuki, could be very sensitive when girls called him weak.

“There, there. You’re a strapping young lad. So do you know which skill you have?”

“A skill, huh...?”

They’d mentioned special abilities at the castle where Mitsuki was summoned, but remembering the events left him in a bad place.

“I don’t have any. They said...I have the power of *Null*.”

“What?” Menou froze. “No... That can’t be right.”

She was immobile for only an instant, but there was something different in

her voice when she began moving again. It seemed Mitsuki hadn't lived up to her expectations, but he couldn't hide the truth.

"That's what they told me."

"Okay... But did they have proof?"

"Yeah, they looked into it with a crystal ball. And apparently it came up as null."

"A crystal ball that gauges skills...? If it can display...the pure... Are they hiding an ancient...?" Menou looked down, muttering something to herself.

"What?"

"Hmm? Nothing. Strange that they'd give you the boot when they were the ones that summoned you. Are you sure you didn't do anything to offend them?"

"They chased me out before I could say anything. Maybe they only needed the girl they summoned with me?"

Menou's eyes glittered. "Another person, huh?"

"Yeah. Supercute, with huge boobs. I only caught a glimpse of her, though."

"And what's her skill?"

"Beats me."

Mitsuki had been kicked out in a matter of seconds. It happened so quickly that he suspected they were trying to hide the girl from him, so he didn't know anything about her.

"But I'd be willing to bet it's something crazy powerful."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"That's just how these things go."

Mitsuki sounded jealous of the girl who got to stay. To kill time during his year off, he'd devoured web novels that often featured this kind of plot, so he was convinced this was the case.

"Yeah? But I still think you have some special skill, too."

“...Cut it out. I already told you I don’t.”

He couldn’t stop himself from snapping at Menou for offering words of consolation. He had just been betrayed by his summoners. It was hard for him to even consider trying to meet her expectations.

As Mitsuki sulked, Menou stared into the distance. “In fact, you simply must. Otherwise, this month’s church activities might...,” she mumbled in a way that sounded ominous.

Menou came to a stop. They’d reached their destination.

“Here we are. I manage this church.”

“Hmm? H-huh... Really?”

“Really.”

Plastering a fake smile on her face, Menou placed her hand on the front gate, which opened with a rusty squeal.

Nothing good could have come out of this church. The gate was dilapidated, the garden overrun with a jungle of weeds, and he even noticed a hinge missing from the door when they stepped inside.

“Uh... Do people really live here...? Because you could’ve fooled me... I mean, it looks like someone tried to tidy up an ancient ruin.”

“Well, you know what they say. Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“Man, everything about this world seems to get worse by the minute.”

As Mitsuki had already suspected it through their earlier conversations, he wasn’t shocked when Menou seemed to be just as broke. The inside of the church was in such terrible shape, it made her cheerful attitude almost depressing.

“Come on. There are plenty of rooms. You’re welcome to stay for a while.”

“Is it safe...? I don’t want to wake up in the morning buried alive under rubble.”

“Oh, it’s perfectly safe.”

Mitsuki nervously eyed the cracks in the walls, presumably from years of

wear. Menou was sporting a suspiciously bright smile.

“As long as its residents have faith, the holy church will never collapse. I mean, look at chapter two, verse five: ‘Rejoice, for the wall that surrounds a pious flock of sheep shall never crumble.’ See? There’s no way it’ll break down!”

“Um, that sounds like perfect foreshadowing. This spells bad news. You should request some construction workers to come here before you hire them out yourself. I think I was safer spending the night under the bridge.”

“I already told you I have no money!” Menou threw a mini-tantrum.

The sorry state of the church seemed to be a sore subject for her. She pointed at him and started raging.

“Listen to you, crying all ‘woe is me’ after skipping meals for a day! Well, that’s nothing! Try living off a few grains of salt for a week! Then you’ll really know the true meaning of hunger! Fix up the church? If I had the money, I’d prioritize feeding the people who have to live on nothing but salt!”

Judging by the tears in her eyes, she was obviously referring to herself.

“Okay! Okay! I’m sorry! I was wrong. Let’s calm down! Okay?”

Menou sniffled. “If you’re sorry, then test out your abilities... Don’t worry. A lost soul should be able to intuitively use Guiding Force.”

“Okay...but I can’t...and what is that, anyway?”

“Shut up and try!”

She was still in tantrum mode.

“If you’re a lost one, all it takes is focus! Use your superstrong powers to do stuff to that statue over there or something. It’s doomed to go to the pawnshop anyway!”

“Wait. What? Pawnshop? Aren’t you a holy woman?”

That seemed totally inappropriate for a priestess, but Mitsuki could understand how being broke did all kinds of things to the brain. He didn’t want to press the subject for fear of making her feel worse.

Mitsuki hadn't even heard of Guiding Force before, but he did as he was told and focused. To his surprise, he found some power inside him that came to him so naturally, he didn't know why he hadn't noticed it before.

Guiding Force: Connect—

Confused by the mysterious sensation, Mitsuki tried to draw it out from within him. *Huh. It's actually intuitive.*

He focused on the statue, and a faint phosphorescence radiated from his body and enveloped the figure.

Suddenly, irresistible desire bubbled up from his soul.

S?T?i?K???Pure Concept [Null]—

The power that surged out of his body followed a bizarre course. It emerged from Mitsuki's consciousness, connecting to the world's energy at the edge of all thought and idea. Finally, a piece of the world fell into place within him.

Invoke [Elimination]

For just an instant, he felt an indescribable discomfort and disgust.

Then he gasped, returning to his senses. The statue was gone.

"It's...not there anymore. What's going on? W-wait! You're not going to use that power on *me*, right?! Um! We come in peace!" Menou exclaimed, sounding completely alien.

"Of course not!"

Suppressing a laugh, Mitsuki checked his own ability more closely.

He understood instinctively that the object that disappeared had been literally made into nothing.

"Man, that's crazy. I bet I could do serious damage as an adventurer or something, huh?"

Menou mentioned that profession was dangerous but rewarding work. Mitsuki had more potential to contribute to this run-down church as an adventurer than as a construction worker.

"True. An ability like yours certainly could be quite destructive."

“Right?”

Menou slipped behind him. Maybe she was still afraid of his newfound skill.

For the first time since he’d arrived, Mitsuki was starting to feel hopeful.

With this, he could surely teach the king a lesson. In fact, if they met again, Mitsuki could use it to ‘eliminate’ him entirely.

“And Guiding Force can temporarily make your whole body stronger. If you learn how to control it, you’ll be able to do even more.”

“Ooh, cool!” He was hyped.

Standing behind him, Menou used the energy to enhance her own strength—a technique known as Guiding Enhancement where the user drew power out of their soul and willed it to fill their flesh.

With her body bathed in the phosphorescent glow—Guiding Light—which signaled the activation of Guiding Enhancement, Menou slipped her hand into the slit of her skirt. The leather belt around her right thigh concealed a single dagger.

“An adventurer, huh?! This is finally starting to feel like a proper fantasy. I’ll *Nullify* anything that gets in my way!”

“Heh. I’m sure.”

Menou smiled and nodded as Mitsuki, trembling with excitement, pumped his fists.

His future was starting to look bright. *I just have to Nullify anything that tries to stop me—or gets in my way or doesn’t go right.*

That was the ability he had acquired from *S?T?i?K???Pure Concept*.

“Ha-ha. Yeah, that’s right. I can make anything into nothing. Now I’m getting pumped!”

“Well, that’s all thanks to my advice. You ought to be grateful.”

“Yeah, that’s true!”

When all was said and done, he owed it all to Menou. If she hadn’t told him about it, he might have died in a ditch somewhere before he noticed this ability.

Menou was an ally. There was no need to use his powers against her.

With gratitude and hope for the future, Mitsuki turned to face her with a smile.

“Okay, Menou. Introduce me to your connections so I can be an adv—”



His smile froze in place as a dagger pierced his temple.

“Hbuh?”

An inhuman noise leaked from Mitsuki’s lips, so strange it was almost comical.

The blade shattered the thinnest part of his skull, drilling into his brain. Life drained away from his wound. It was a miracle he didn’t die instantly. Mitsuki saw one last sight before he crumpled to the floor.

It was Menou, holding the dagger to his head.

“Wh...y...?”

He would be dead in moments. Flooded with despair at this betrayal, power violently welled up within him.

Guiding Force: Connect—S?T?i?K???Pure Concept [Null]—Invoke [What n’t be happening rrible d like this ullify everyth this world a little b better how could y Menou]

Energy streamed from his soul, flooding Mitsuki’s body.

“Ah!”

Menou turned pale, sensing something irregular conjuring itself in the dying boy.

A flash of light surged from his eyes, and she dove to the side to dodge, curling up and tumbling across the floor.

There was no crash, no telltale sound of destruction. In fact, it was so quiet that one might think nothing had happened at all.

But when Menou stood up, she felt a gentle breeze—felt the afternoon sunlight on her skin.

Even though she was standing indoors.

“...Should’ve expected that from an Otherworlder.”

Having narrowly avoided the conjuring the boy unleashed in his final moments, Menou sank to the floor.

The part of the church where she’d been standing seconds before was

completely gone—from the floor to the wall and even the ceiling.

There had been no sound when the idea of “nothing” had manifested. The border around the vanished area was frighteningly smooth.

“Impressive that he didn’t die right away. He was a real beast, even among those with exceptional powers granted by a Pure Concept.”

She cautiously approached the boy and tilted his head up to confirm he was dead. Driven by amplified Guiding Force, the blade had plunged through his cranium and taken his life.

“Your last words were ‘why,’ huh?”

She checked his pupils for any reaction.

“...You were right: This church has been abandoned for years. I decided to use its remains for this mission.”

She no longer displayed any of the cheerful expressiveness that she’d shown him.

Instead, she spoke with a quiet tone that better matched her mature features and pale complexion.

“I was lying about setting you up with a job, too. Offering aid is one of the church’s duties, but that was just a convenient means of winning you over. I wanted to know your ability before I killed you, so I had to find a way question you without arousing suspicion.”

No signs of movement in his pupils, his breath, or his pulse. No signs of life.

The boy on the floor was just a corpse.

“After all, some have abilities that make it difficult to kill them completely.”

This boy’s power was the Pure Concept of *Null*.

It was a terrifying power that could return any target to nothingness. If the user grew and deepened their understanding of the Pure Concept, they could even learn to do things like *Nullifying* their own death.

“We received information that the top players of the Noblesse were planning to summon Otherworlders. And we confirmed signs of the summoning

ceremony in the astral vein. That's why they dispatched someone like me to deal with you."

She'd initially planned to infiltrate the castle, but when she saw a young man in a school jacket come out first, she suspected it might be a trap. She monitored him overnight before making contact. Then she lured him into the church, her base of operations, and assessed his ability through their conversation.

There was no need for further interaction.

If anything, it would be foolish to give him a chance to figure out his abilities. As soon as she confirmed his skills, it was necessary to dispose of him at once.

From the very beginning, she had approached with the intent to kill him.

"You did nothing wrong."

Having confirmed he was dead, Menou gently closed his eyelids.

"It's not your fault. You didn't do anything deserving of death. I'm the villain, and you're the victim."

The boy who'd been smiling and looking forward to the future just moments ago would never rise again. Menou had robbed him of that possibility.

"And yet..."

Though she knew she'd done the unforgivable, Menou softly continued, as if offering her condolences to the fallen.

"...The Sword of Salt that sank the western continent into the sea. The Pandemonium that devoured the southern archipelago. The Mechanical Society that controls the Wild Frontier in the east. The Starhusk that carved out the center of the northern continent and set it afloat."

Each of these titles referred to legendary disasters that had occurred in this world.

These four calamities were caused by supernatural forces. The massive scars left across the continents were so surreal, its sights were etched permanently into the mind of any who witnessed the wreckage. Though the phenomena that caused each of them were different in nature, they all shared the same source.

Despite being on the scale of a natural disaster, none of these events had happened naturally.

They were caused by Human Error—man-made calamities brought about by Otherworlders.

“...Your kind have simply caused too much harm,” she explained to his now-silent remains.

Otherworlders. While some saw them as potential tools, their powers made them so dangerous that they became targets for disposal.

Of course, Menou did feel some pity for them, caught up in the power struggles of a world not their own. But she would never let her emotions prevent her from completing a mission.

She’d already resolved long ago that she must take on the role of a villain.

Which was why, although she pretended to be friendly to get close to the boy, she never once asked for his name.

“Otherworlders are taboo entities that we, as Executioners, must exterminate.”

They served as the assassins of the First Estate, the Faust, and hunted down these human hazards by any means necessary.

They were forever concealed in the shadows, and this was Menou’s true identity.

“...If you truly had no ability, I wouldn’t have had to kill you.”

Her quiet murmur carried a trace of sadness at the loss of this modest hope.

In the end, though, he had a skill. And what’s more, as soon as he activated it, he clearly began expressing intentions to *Nullify* others. As a side effect of his abilities, the Pure Concept started devouring his soul, dragging his thoughts toward the idea of *Null*. Before long, his soul would have been taken over completely, and he could very well have committed acts that would eventually build to another Human Error.

Menou tugged the dagger out of the boy’s skull and wiped it clean of blood.

As she locked eyes with her reflection in the blade, she suddenly remembered the dream she had that morning.

The dream was in some classroom in Japan at a school she'd never been to.

Everyone was in different uniforms. There were students in jackets, blazers, sailor uniforms... Even though their clothing clashed, nothing seemed out of place, for some reason.

When she entered the classroom, they all stopped talking and looked at her.

The space was warm—hushed with no conflict. Nobody was armed with weapons. Other than dipping into their studies, everyone was free to spend their time however they chose.

When she greeted them, they welcomed her with friendly smiles, chatting about nothing in particular.

She was friends with everyone in the class, and among them was her best friend.

They were very close. There were no secrets between them. It made her happy to see her friend upbeat. And it made her friend happy when she was in a good mood, too. They understood each other because she knew about her friend's tragic past and her friend was aware of her regrets.

She talked with her best friend about nothing in particular as they waited for class to start.

It was a place she'd never seen before.

A world she would never be able to touch.

She knew about this place called Japan only because she was taught to kill its people.

That dream was the embodiment of her sins.

When she had it next, she was certain there would be another member of the class in a mismatched uniform: a boy in his school blazer.

There was nothing more to it than that.

“As for this other girl...”

She had to seek out this second Otherworlder in the castle and take her life.

Thus, the Executioner began to play out her next plan of action, acknowledging her sins and her role as a villain all the while.



The Executioner



Within the crumbling interior of the abandoned church stood an unnaturally new altar.

The altar wasn't originally part of the furnishings. Rather, it was a makeshift one that Menou put together for this mission. This special construct, used exclusively by the Faust—members of the First Estate who served the Lord—utilized the power that flowed through all things to communicate with others over vast distances by sending signals along the veins of energy that ran throughout the earth.

Atop the pedestal was the image of an elderly woman projected in Guiding Light.

“Interesting... So two people were summoned.”

“Yes, Archbishop Orwell. The deceased confirmed this information.”

The person receiving Menou's report was an old woman with gentle features who looked to be in her midseventies. Every strand of her hair was stark white, and she leaned on a cane to support her bent back. However, the clarity in her voice hinted that she was of sound mind and body.

Orwell was in the faraway city of Garm, the ancient capital. She was an important leader of the Faust, in charge of the entire parish.

“It seems they were very careful about this summoning. You'll have your work cut out for you, Ms. Menou.”

“It's all right. This is my job.”

The Executioners were personnel of the holy land, if only unofficially. Traditionally, they were under no obligation to report their progress to this nation, not even to the archbishop.

But Orwell had provided accommodations in a variety of ways for Menou's

missions in this nation. Even this base of operations was arranged by the archbishop. In return for her help, Menou occasionally gave Orwell updates on her progress when she finished her duties.

“I will attempt to infiltrate the royal castle once I determine the other target’s location.”

“Very well. I’d appreciate it if you could contact me again when that’s done.”

Orwell’s eyes suddenly softened as she picked up cues that the report was wrapping up.

“Once you finish your duty, you’re welcome to take some leave. This is your first time back in your homeland in quite a while, is it not?”

“Yes...that’s true.”

Menou blinked in surprise at the unexpected change in subject. Why did the archbishop know about her past? She searched her mind for an answer. There was only one possibility.

“Archbishop Orwell... Does this mean, by any chance, you remember that incident?”

“Why wouldn’t I? Even though it’s already been ten years, I could never forget that town or the girl who survived it. It left a very strong impression, you see.”

Orwell was the top brass of the Faust in this nation, both in name and in reality. Unlike Menou, who lived her life as an Executioner, Orwell had saved many people as part of her public work as a woman of the church.

Her capabilities were made especially clear in the incident of Human Error that occurred ten years prior.

The disaster, in which an entire town had disappeared, was the reason Menou became an Executioner. On the day her hometown was erased, young Menou met Archbishop Orwell.

That said, it was really only the briefest of meetings. While it was no surprise that Orwell would remember the incident itself, Menou had never imagined the archbishop would remember meeting a survivor like her.

“On that note, Ms. Menou, I would love to have a nice long chat with you

sometime.”

“I would be honored if the chance ever arises... Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Menou bowed her head respectfully to conclude the meeting.

As the slight tension left her shoulders, she sighed. “My homeland, huh...?”

The conversation prompted her to turn her thoughts inward for the first time in a while. She was trying to see if she could dig out anything from the deep recesses of her brain, but she didn’t feel even a trace of nostalgia.

It was true Menou came from this land. But the town where she was born was long gone. It had been wiped out completely by the rampage of an Otherworlder.

That place had been scoured from the map and from Menou’s memories. Such was the nature of a Human Error.

“...It doesn’t feel very real.”

Of course it didn’t. Giving up on uncovering her memories, Menou turned her attention to the matter at hand.

Her job wasn’t over yet. With narrowed eyes, she left the church through the empty void in the ruins.

The edifice was surrounded by a wall, shielding it from the eyes of townspeople outside. Menou stopped in the dilapidated garden, calling out in warning.

“Show yourself. I know you’ve been tailing me.”

Sensing that there was no use in hiding, the men emerged from the shadows.

There were four of them. All brawny, dangerous-looking men, with longswords strapped at their waists.

Intuitively discerning their identities, Menou curled her lips in displeasure.

“Should fine gentlemen of the Noblesse really be slinking after a young lady?”

“Enough babbling, Executioner of the Faust.”

Clearly, they weren’t interested in a conversation, and they knew her

position. Menou silently raised an eyebrow.

Society was divided into three estates of the realm:

The lowest were the Commons, ordinary folk who made up more than 90 percent of the population.

Next were the Noblesse, consisting of nobility and royalty. They oversaw the administration and governed the Commons.

And finally, the holy Faust.

It was no surprise the men could glean her social standing. That much was obvious from her clothing alone.

But the fact that they knew she was an Executioner was another story.

“Then I suppose that means you’re from the Order of Knights.”

Neither Menou nor the men were willing to confirm or deny their positions.

Even among the Noblesse, only knights would be allowed to carry a sword in public. Of course, these interlopers could be run-of-the-mill criminals who possessed illicit weapons, but that was doubtful given the designs of the crests prominently featured on their sword hilts.

“The guard dogs of whoever’s summoning Otherworlders, then.”

“We have no intention of fighting you.”

While Menou sneered at them, the men were more matter-of-fact.

“You’ve already killed our target. You should pack up and leave this nation at once. It doesn’t sit right having someone like you around these parts.”

“Too bad. I won’t be leaving just yet,” Menou rejected. “I’m afraid I still have another job to do.”

At that, the knights assumed new expressions for the first time.

Their reaction confirmed her working theory based on the information she got from the boy.

“I see. I was wondering why you would chase out one Otherworlder, but it appears you’re not as brainless as I thought. I imagine you knew you wouldn’t

be able to hide your ritual from the church.”

“ ... ”

The knights relaxed their expressions, but it was too late.

Of the many kinds of conjuring, summoning an Otherworlder demanded a particularly large ritual. Its invocation required connecting the two astral veins—the heavenly vein and the earthen vein—that channeled the power that was essentially the planet’s lifeblood. The church was constantly surveilling the astral veins, since it was essential to humanity’s survival. It would be all but impossible to keep them from noticing the disturbance that came with a major ritual.

“So you were planning to cut one of the two from the beginning, then. That boy was bait to satisfy the Executioners... You summoned him so I would kill him. Is that right?”

When Archbishop Orwell assessed that they were being “careful,” this was what she meant. They must have intended to let an Executioner kill one of the Otherworlders and assume the mission was complete. And the knight advising her to go home was here to make sure of that.

But they didn’t anticipate their bait would know there was another Otherworlder.

“What a pathetic little trick.”

As Menou looked at them with daggers in her eyes, one of the knights scowled.

“If you’d just been satisfied with killing one and went home...”

Clearly, he’d realized there was no talking their way out of this.

It was common for the Noblesse to defy or rise against the Faust. Since the Faust served as overseers of the Noblesse, there was little lost love between them.

“But something isn’t adding up. Did you really think you could escape our investigation?”

Menou voiced her doubts, partly to keep the enemy talking.

This plan wouldn't have helped them avoid punishment from the church, even if it had succeeded.

Whether or not the Executioner's blade missed its mark, the church was already aware someone had summoned an Otherworlder. The Noblesse responsible would still be officially judged by the Faust.

It would likely have resulted in a lengthy trial following official procedures, but the punishment would have come sooner or later.

As the top dogs with influence over the entire continent, the Faust possessed more power than the entire Noblesse of a nation. There was no way they could have expected to avoid an investigation forever.

The answer came from one of the knights.

"His Majesty is prepared. We would sacrifice one Otherworlder to hide the other from the Executioners. His Majesty knew he might even be executed himself by the Faust—but in exchange, we gain the power to break free of the despotic control of your Lord...!"

"Well, isn't that noble. A shame that the Noblesse have once again failed this attempt at martyrdom."

Discussion time was over. Their eyes flashing, the knights drew their swords.

The moment Menou learned two Otherworlders had been summoned, their plan was ruined. If they hoped to succeed, the knights had only one option.

"Now that you know the secret, we can't let you escape alive. We'll finish you off here and now, you hound of the Faust!"

"...Well, that's fine with me."

For just a moment, Menou's gaze darted over to the dead boy lying inside the church.

The poor boy was summoned as bait to cover up the existence of the second Otherworlder. A sacrifice for a villain like herself. A part of a foolish plan.

Menou glared at the men in front of her. "It doesn't pain me in the slightest to dispose of rotten scoundrels."

“That’s our line, you egotistical assassin!”

The man roared and charged toward her. There were four of them in total. One jumped at Menou while the others tried to surround her.

Menou was desperately outnumbered, but there wasn’t a trace of panic on her face. She smoothly readied the scripture in her left hand and the dagger in her right, drawing on the power that resided within her.

A faint glow enveloped her entire body.

With her physical strength enhanced by Guiding Force, Menou lunged toward the first attacker, fearless of his longsword’s reach. The surrounding knights didn’t just stand around—one lashed downward with his sword.

Menou parried it with her dagger.

“Gah...!”

The knight grunted in surprise at the resistance he faced, far stancher than expected from a dagger, much less one wielded by a young girl.

The great power that fills the world is produced by Concepts, which are the source of the astral vein, and it flows into every corner of the planet. Known as Guiding Force, this power dwells within human souls and can be manipulated by those with strong mental fortitude to produce infinite possibilities.

Menou used it to make up for her lighter weight and lesser muscle strength. It let her trade blows evenly with men twice her size.

“You little brat...!”

The knights weaponized Guiding Force to raise their own strength, but they still couldn’t keep up with her.

Compared to the young girl, their base physical strength was far superior. But with her effortless use of Enhancement, Menou was able to compete with the brawny knights in close combat.

Her strategy was completely different. She favored rapid movements, cleverly deploying feints and nimble footwork to keep the engagement distance to her advantage. It was a fighting style that specialized in taking on multiple opponents alone—and surviving.

Menou deftly avoided their attacks, never stopping in one place.

With proficient use of feints and taking care to keep her blind spots protected, she fended off four longswords with a single dagger. Her counterstrokes were deadly and merciless, sure to kill if her opponents let down their guards. In both mind and body, it was difficult to believe she was just a young girl.

In a few short minutes of battle, the outcome was clear to both sides.

In a four-to-one battle, the knights had a slight advantage. But they knew as well as she did that there was more to it than that.

The girl wasn't just terrifying in close combat. She still hadn't made use of the ability that came with her status as one of the Faust.

In an attempt to bring her down before she could play her trump card, two of the knights pulled back from the melee and reached into the deep recesses of their consciousness.

Their trained minds drew from their own souls the power that made up all things.

Their mental control drew the Guiding Force up and into their swords, which were able to conduct it thanks to careful materials science and design. Then the power surged into the crests carved into their hilts and produced special effects.

Guiding Force: Connect—Sword, Crest—Invoke [Flameblade]

Flames roared out from the swords.

This was conjuring, invoked using Guiding Force. The essence of its power was not to simply enhance one's body for martial arts. Its real value lay in manifesting man-made miracles in a process called "conjuring."

The energy turned into flame according to the patterning of the crest, whipping out toward Menou.

"...Fools."

Menou let herself feel a moment of fleeting pity for these men, who had distanced themselves to avoid getting caught up in their own flames. The

moment they failed to defeat her while they maintained the tiniest of advantages, they had lost whatever small chance of victory they might have had.

The scripture in her left hand glowed.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 2:5—Invoke [Rejoice, for the wall that surrounds a pious flock of sheep shall never crumble.]

The Guiding Force drawn from her soul streamed into the scripture, took the form of a conjuring, and manifested as a physical phenomenon.

What appeared was a glowing white wall, so pure and clean it seemed unthinkable that it could ever be marred. The flickering wall of light completely blocked the flames produced by the two knights.

“What the—?!”

They were floored by the sheer speed of the conjuring and the massive amount of pure energy thrumming in the wall that appeared.

The priestesses of the Faust were all skilled conjurers, with no exception. The scriptures they lugged around were advanced spellbooks, containing spells of all varieties and strengths. This was why they were on guard from the start.

But this far exceeded anything they could have imagined.

“I-impossible. What the hell was that?!”

“That’s too fast...! She cast it straight from the scripture—without a crest?!”

A strong will and deep focus were required to draw energy from the soul for conjuring. For practical use in battle, it was common to break into front and rear lines as the knights had done.

And to conjure directly from a scripture was far more difficult than using a crest.

Scriptures were advanced vessels that recorded crests by the thousands or even tens of thousands, contorting them to take the shape of letters. A single crest could materialize energy in only one way, but a scripture was composed of thousands of them across hundreds of pages. To invoke them, the user had to focus Guiding Force on the chosen phrase with perfect accuracy, delicately

weaving the streams of power together to bind a spell until it manifested as a physical phenomenon.

Yet Menou didn't even open the scripture, continuing to strengthen her body with energy as she simultaneously activated a complex piece of conjuring. Executioners were chosen from only the most elite Faust, but this was still an unbelievable level of technique.

As he laid eyes on the extraordinary power, one of the knights voiced a theory.

"A scripture and a dagger! And lightning-fast conjuring... Could you be the infamous Flare?!"

"That's ridiculous! It was more than ten years ago when that devil ran rampant. She's far too young!"

"That's right. Flare became a Master long ago."

Menou introduced herself in a quiet and deadly tone as the knights staggered back.

"I'm the piece of art that Master created—the successor, *Flarette*."

Menou's reason for needlessly revealing her identity was simple.

While the knights were distracted by her identity, she was able to finish preparing her attack. Menou's attention had been turned inward to draw out her next burst of power, which she now focused on the men.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 3:1—Invoke [And the oncoming enemy did hear the tolling of the bell.]

The power that infused the scripture in Menou's hand produced a spell.

"Forward—!"

By the time one of them tried to yell out in warning, it was far too late.

As Menou's energy flowed through the scripture and coalesced, it transformed into a bell made of raw power. The bell tower, a symbol that reminded people of the sacredness of the church each time it tolled the hour, loomed over the knights.

The magnificent bell began to swing back and forth.

Charged with power, a sound loud enough to rend the air rang out. The resulting wave of pressure struck the knights below, pulping their bodies from the inside. The only one who escaped this gruesome fate was the leader, who had pushed ahead right away. His assumption that the space where the caster was standing would be safe was correct—and deadly wrong at the same time.

As he rushed forward with the sole intent of escaping, Menou had her dagger at the ready.

“Gah... Graaaah!”

“Heh.”

He had nerve, at least. But the knight’s posture as he half ran, half stumbled toward her wasn’t nearly good enough.

With a tiny snort, Menou parried his feeble swing and closed in on him. She punctured one of his lungs and kidneys with her dagger, then pulled out with a twist.

“Agh...”

The knight stumbled back and slumped to the ground.

A bloody foam gurgled from the edge of his lips. His haggard breath wheezed out like air from a broken sack, indicating his impending death.

Aware of it himself, the knight glared at Menou with bitter eyes.

“Why do your lot...use your power...to serve some so-called Lord...?”

“...I’ll pretend I didn’t hear you making rude remarks about the Lord.”

Menou tucked the scripture under one arm and raised the dagger in her right hand, pointing the tip directly at the knight’s heart.

Then she brought it down to release him from his suffering.

“A—”

Were his final words intended for his family or his master? Or were they words of hatred directed toward the church?

Whatever the case, life drained from his body before he could share them.

“I’m still the villain, but in this case, I won’t say you did nothing wrong.”

He was the only one of the four who left behind an intact corpse. Menou reached down and closed his eyelids.

“What you summoned was a monster far more horrifying than the likes of me...and yet a child far more ordinary than I could ever hope to be.”

The sin of involving someone who was living peacefully to use them for their own devices was one worthy of their deaths.

“It’s a shame a villain was the one to punish you for it.”

With a slightly melancholy look in her eyes, Menou said a silent prayer for their deaths.

When her own punishment finally came, what form would it take?

The thought hung heavy over her mind as Menou murmured a prayer for the souls she had slain.

Once her prayers were complete, Menou slowly opened her eyes.

The sound of soft clapping echoed quietly in the church, beyond the gory evidence of battle.

“Amazing as aaalways, my dearly beloved darliiing. Those Noblesse knights didn’t know what hit them! And you never even let them lay a finger on yooou. Magnificent.”

The voice that reached Menou’s ears was sweet, lilting, and familiar.

Turning to face the source of the syrupy drawl, Menou found a petite girl in a white version of her own priestess robes.

Her soft, wavy pink hair was separated into short pigtails that fluttered gently in the breeze. Though her white elbow-length gloves were modest enough, part of her uniform had been modified into a frilly culotte that ended above the knee, hardly befitting a holy woman.

Unlike Menou, who exuded a poised maturity, the smiling girl had an impish air of cuteness about her.

She stepped closer to Menou with a smile so bright it almost seemed calculated.

“It is I, Momo, your servant for liiife!”

“Stop calling yourself that.”

Menou sighed at the bizarre self-introduction as she locked eyes with Momo.

The pink-haired girl was only two years younger than her, but she was significantly smaller, which only seemed to emphasize her cutesiness. She wore tights below her alarmingly short skirt, decorated with a mark on the thigh that looked like a heart or a cute tail. Whenever she saw the design, Menou couldn’t help smiling drily, as it was so fitting.

Momo was a member of the Faust, serving as assistant to the Executioner Menou.

The white color of the priestess robes reflected their difference in standing.

“Perfect timing, Momo. I have to ask you something about the mission—”

“Oh, that can waaait.”

“Excuse you?”

Momo ambled up to Menou innocently, ignoring her. Instead, she nonchalantly grabbed Menou’s hand and nuzzled it against her own cheek.

“Ahhhh, I’m finally reunited with my darliing! I can finally charge up on Menou-energy!”

Momo squeezed Menou’s hand and rubbed her face against it with a happy sigh while Menou looked on wearily.

“Listen, Momo. I wanted to ask—”

“Oh, darling, your Momo can’t beeeear it. I know it’s for the mission, but being away from you is still so haaard. It’s been two whole daaays! If I had my way, I’d be by your side every hour of every day of every yeeear, or even longer if I coould. Whenever I have to work without you, it hurts sooo much that I could just— Yowch!”

“All right, already. Just let go, please.”

“Booo. Fine.”

Menou lightly flicked her subordinate’s forehead. Momo pursed her lips, but she reluctantly let go of her hand.

“And as I keep telling you, you have to stop calling yourself my ‘servant.’ You’re my aide, remember? What if the other priestesses get the wrong idea?”

“Our relationship goes far beyond that of an Executioner and her aide! I’m your beloved servant! I follow and obey you in the name of looove! If anything, I should make sure everyone knows, to make it publicly officiaa!!”

“I’d rather you didn’t...”

The girl’s impassioned speech and frantic waving of her arms threatened to give Menou a headache.

Momo was in charge of supporting Menou on her missions. They’d known each other since they were young and trained in the same monastery. It was true they shared something that went beyond a professional working relationship.

If anything, Momo had seemed to dislike Menou when they first met, and yet she became very attached to her over the years, until it reached this new extreme.

“But it’s amazing to watch you fight, darliing!”

Momo had apparently witnessed the entire battle from start to finish. She pressed her hands to her cheeks and wiggled her small frame with delight.

“That expert handling of your dagger against those arrogant knights, and your smooth control over your power that lets you quickly cast from scripture... Ahhh, Momo could fall for you all over agaaain. It’s no wonder you became the youngest Executioner eveeer! I love yooou!”

“The dead knights must have had a messenger as well. Did you capture him?”

“I also simply adore the way you give me the cold shoulder!”

The conversation would never get anywhere if Menou indulged in Momo’s exaggerated praise. But even when Menou glared at her and pressed on with her question, Momo’s fervor showed no signs of waning.

“If you don’t stop messing around soon, I’m going to get angry, you know. Just answer me already.”

As soon as they identified Menou as an Executioner, the Order of Knights members must have tried to get word back to their superiors. No doubt the reason they bothered conversing with Menou before battle was to buy time for their messenger. She was certain someone must have been sent to the castle.

“Fiiine. I put a stop to that, of cooourse.”

Momo finally gave a straight answer. Since they’d known each other for so long, she could tell when she was starting to cross the line.

“One of those stalker knights went running off as soon as yooou set foot in the church, but I took care of him. There’s no way your identity got out!”

“Very good.”

Menou trusted her to take care of things, but it was still a relief to hear their mission hadn’t been compromised.

In spite of her goofy demeanor, Momo was an excellent aide. Menou knew she wouldn’t overlook anything.

The Order of Knights was highly trained in battle, even more so than any other Noblesse. They were not the crown’s personal army, but the disciplined military force of the Second Estate, generally serving as law enforcement in towns and cities.

Thus, there weren’t too many knights that the king in this nation could employ and entrust with certain information without the church finding out.

“We should be able to cover up the details of our activities for a while, then. But since we killed several knights, it’s safe to assume they know we’re making some kind of move—or they will before long. We have to devise a plan to infiltrate the royal castle before the day is out.”

“Leave it to meee. I’ve been keeping an eye on the castle and figuring out the floor plan for daaays. I have a good idea of where the Otherworlder miiiight be.”

“I knew I could count on you. Well done, Momo.”

“Tee-hee.”

When all was said and done, Momo always went above and beyond her call of duty. Menou patted her head in praise, causing the other girl to smile widely and nestle against Menou’s hand.

“Let’s get rid of these bodies and work out our plan.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After mourning the loss of Menou’s hand on her head for a moment, Momo set about cleaning up the scattered corpses.

“But you knooow, when you were playing nice with that Otherworlder, you were the cutest girl in the wooorld. It was only half a performance, huh? It reminded me of how you act on a day oooff.”

“You were watching for that long...? I certainly don’t think I behave like such an airhead.”

Menou smiled wanly and shook her head.

It was true that she behaved differently while on a mission than on personal time, but even the real Menou was never that open and outgoing. She had simply put on an extra-bright personality for the sake of getting the boy to let down his guard.

“The trick to putting on an act without raising suspicion is to be friendly and show them your genuine emotions. Tapping into your actual self makes it seem more natural. Like the month when we fasted and ate nothing but salt.”

“Oh, right. Of all the bizarre training we went through, that was one of the strangest of all...”

“Agreed. I almost suspect it was for the Master’s entertainment...”

The two were raised in the same monastery, so they had plenty of shared trauma.

“But I don’t like you showing your inner self to a taboo entity, darliiing.”

“Hmm? Why not?”

“...No reasoon. Ah, while we’re at it, I’ll come clean, too. The truth is, I love

you more than anyone!”

“Yeah? So all your flattery has just been an act to get my guard down?”

“You know that’s not true! It’s pure, one hundred percent true love!”

Chattering amicably while keeping their voices low enough to not be heard outside the church walls, the two finished disposing of the bodies and returned inside the building.

Though the mood was peaceful, they never relaxed their guards.

Thus, they began discussing a plan to kill the next Otherworlder.

Menou’s meeting with Momo in one of the rooms of the church was markedly serious.

They came up with an infiltration route based on Momo’s intel and ran through simulations to plan for the unexpected.

When Menou finished crafting a detailed strategy based on her aide’s information and started preparing to put it into action, she wound up being stuck wearing a maid outfit.

“Hee-hee. Darling, that’s a great look on you.”

“Don’t mention it…please.”

Momo was all smiles, but Menou wasn’t so sure how to feel about wearing a frilly costume.

Menou was about to head to the royal castle. Since her priestess clothes would draw attention, Momo had prepared a maid uniform to help her blend in.

Experimenting with her range of motion in the outfit, Menou held up the hem of its long skirt.

“This is incredibly well made …”

“Tee-hee. It’s an extra-special outfit I crafted for you with lots of love and care.”

The high-quality fabric was cut without a crease in sight, and the expert stitches would put a pro to shame. Every seam of the inner lining was perfectly

in place. In fact, it was so flawless it was almost scary.

Menou could scarcely believe Momo made it herself. It was carefully constructed with ease of mobility in mind, to the point where it might even be more comfortable than her usual robes.

“Thanks for going to all the trouble. Although, if I could only use Guiding Camouflage to alter my outfit, you wouldn’t have needed to spend all that time on making the real thing.”

Camouflage was a technique that used Guiding Light.

An experienced user could alter the colors of the glow that surrounded the body during Enhancement. There wasn’t much point in changing it from one single color to another, but detailed alterations could create optical illusions around the body, making it possible for the user to vanish into their surroundings or even look like someone else entirely.

If Menou was standing still, she was capable of projecting someone else’s appearance. Cloaking movements in real time was considerably more difficult. Thus, the only way for her to pull off a disguise was to prepare a real costume.

That said, Momo didn’t seem bothered by the task Menou had assigned her. If anything, she looked thrilled to see her mentor in a maid outfit.

“It’s fiiine. Don’t worry about it. I was happy to make clothes for you, darliiing!”

“I mean, you could have just found something ready-made instead... In fact, is it just me, or is this a little *too* elaborate?”

It was definitely a maid outfit, but the skirt was sewn with tons of extra fabric to create pleats, and there were billowing frills around the hem. It seemed a little too cute and extravagant to be practical.

Menou didn’t want to complain after asking Momo for this favor. But how did she carve out the time to make something so high-quality while gathering information for infiltrating the castle? It was an utter mystery.

Momo’s answer, however, was simple.

“It’s fashion.”

“Is that necessary? I don’t think clothes designed for going undercover need to be fashionable.”

“It’s veeery necessary! Anything you wear simply must be!”

Momo clenched her fists insistently, even though she wasn’t the one who had to wear it. Like a stubborn and passionate zealot, she was clearly unwilling to back down on this subject.

What am I going to do with this girl? Menou wondered briefly, but this was no time for a foolish debate. She gave up on getting through to Momo and moved on to the next subject.

“Well, it shouldn’t pose a problem for the mission, so I suppose that’s all right. At any rate, maybe you should learn Camouflage. It’s very convenient, since you can apply it as you enhance your powers.”

“Easy for you to saaay. You’re the only one who learned that technique well enough to use it in real combat, you knooow.”

“Really? I’m sure you could do it, given enough time, Momo. You’re very gifted.”

“Not like thaaat. And since it was our instructor who invented it, you know it must be strange.”

Menou kept looking down at herself in the costume, fiddling with the skirt. The apron even had an inner pocket sized perfectly to hold her scripture.

Invoking a conjuring required a medium. A scripture was especially useful, since it served as a medium for many different types of conjuring, but carrying one around openly while in a maid outfit would look suspicious. The dagger Menou kept strapped to her thigh had crests for invoking simple spells, but due to the nature of materialogy, it could handle only two of them. Being able to carry her scripture in secret was the perfect solution.

“You really put a lot of thought into this. I certainly can’t complain about—Hmm?”

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:1—Invoke [Transcribe the miracle before my eyes, for it must be recorded.]

While Menou was putting her scripture in the inner pocket and testing how it affected the balance of her movement, she spotted a slight glow out of the corner of her eye.

It was so brief that most people would assume they'd imagined it. The user would have to be incredibly talented to construct and invoke their power so stealthily.

But nothing got past Menou. She traced the conjuring to the source and turned to glare at the culprit.

"...Momo. Answer me honestly."

"Hmm? What is it, darliing?"

"Hee-hee. Between you and me..."

Menou suddenly shifted from an interrogative tone to a sweet, sultry smile. Immediately, Momo's face relaxed as well.

Then Menou used the moment of weakness to drive home her question.

"Did you record an image of me in your scripture just now?"

"Whatever do you meeean?"

Momo was impressively good at feigning innocence, the cute smile on her face not wavering in the slightest.

As an Executioner's aide, Momo was expected to maintain that expression. No doubt she'd be able to pull off any mission that involved acting without a hitch.

Menou's interrogation had failed, but there was more than enough circumstantial evidence.

The suspect and the investigator stood in utter silence for a moment, smiles still plastered on their faces.

In the next instant, both of them were glowing with Guiding Light.

Using power drawn from their souls to enhance their physical capabilities, the two began grappling faster than an ordinary eye could follow.

"Just tear out the page for chapter one, verse one and give it to me! I've had

it up to here with your habit of sneaking photos without my permission!”

“I caaan’t. Your Momo would never rip a page out of the scripture.”

“A shameless excuse if I’ve ever heard one! We both know your grade in theology was the lowest in our class by the end!”

“Fine, I admit the words of the Lord mean nothing to me, buuut this is a holy record of your photos! Nothing could be more sacred than my faith and love for you. I’ll never let you tear out a paaage!”

“Stop being so stubborn!!”

Menou’s movements were smoother, but Momo had the advantage in terrain. Since she was already close to the giant hole in the church, Momo was able to escape outside in one swift motion, narrowly keeping her scripture out of Menou’s grasping hands.

“Whew, I’m saaafe!”

Momo bounded out of the garden and leaped onto the wall as nimbly as a cat, then opened her book. One of the many functions of the advanced spellbook was that it allowed the user to record still images with Guiding Light. In the pages, there was a miniature version of Menou twirling in her apron dress as she had been moments before.

“Hee-hee. A wonderful shot, if I do say so myself. You look so good with that dashing slit in your usual clothes, of cooourse, but variety is the spice of liiife. My collection grows agaaain!”

“...”

As Momo beamed down at her brightly, Menou’s expression finally went blank.

Guiding Force: Connect—

“Ah! Ha-ha-ha. Farewell for now, darliiing. We’ll meet again after the mission is dooone!”

She must have detected the danger when Menou wordlessly started charging her scripture with power. With one last quick smile, Momo hurriedly scampered away.

Watching her aide disappear, Menou ground her teeth in frustration.

“She always wastes her talents...! What am I going to do with her...?”

Heaving a sigh, she reflected on the encounter.

Momo had been behaving more or less the same as usual. That excessive amount of flattery and touchy-feeliness was standard for her.

While she always goofed around like that, she’d been a little more ridiculous than usual today.

The only times Momo really messed around with Menou and toed the line were right after a particularly unpleasant mission.

And Menou had just recently killed a taboo entity who was nothing more than an innocent boy.

“She was looking out for me, huh...?”

Thanks to Momo, Menou’s dark mood had lifted considerably.

How many other people had shown her such affection since she became an Executioner? It meant she shouldn’t be on the receiving end of kindness, yet Momo always smiled at her and touched her as if it were perfectly normal. She didn’t hesitate to put Menou’s hand to her cheek, even when it was stained in blood.

Menou fiddled with her ponytail as she mulled over the rarity of such a thing, but when she thought more carefully about Momo’s behavior, her eyes narrowed.

“There’s another issue at play. I suspect she was mostly being her usual self.”

Just like that, her feelings of gratitude shifted back into irritation. Momo’s everyday behavior was still a problem.

“Hmph. At any rate, once this mission is over, I’ll have to take a look at Momo’s scripture.”

Menou grumbled to herself as she removed the apron from her maid outfit. She was left wearing a simple black dress.

The time had come. She had to step out of the warm moment created by her

aide, which had let her ease the tension from her shoulders.

Menou left the church through the front gate. Squinting at the sinking sun, the Executioner slipped into the throngs of people on the street and headed toward the royal castle to locate the Otherworlder.

Sneaking into the castle was a simple task for Menou.

She'd memorized the layout beforehand and the route that Momo had outlined.

Menou proceeded with meticulous caution as she infiltrated the castle in the maid outfit. Momo's intel was extensive and near flawless, right down to the guards' patrols. As she proceeded deeper into the castle, careful to avoid notice, she found the room that was the most heavily guarded.

Bingo. Feeling grateful for her talented aide, Menou located the guards watching the room from a distance and discreetly knocked them out with conjuring.

"Now..."

As she lowered the last unconscious guard to the floor, Menou turned her attention to the room she was targeting.

She was in a different section of the castle than the room containing the Otherworlder. The deepest part of the royal palace had wings in all four directions, with a garden courtyard at the center. Conveniently, the guards were watching the Otherworlder's room from the wing opposite it in the garden.

Since it was built for surveilling the summoned, this room had a very good view of the target.

Menou crossed her arms, contemplating how best to infiltrate the room. She could simply go through the hallway and enter through the front door, but that would take a little longer. Deciding speed was of the utmost importance, Menou fixed her gaze on the balcony outside the room.

The Executioner reached down and drew the dagger she kept strapped to her thigh. The ornamentation on it wasn't just for show; they were crests, a

medium for conjuring.

She chose one of the two crests etched into the dagger and charged it with power.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Thread]

An ultrafine thread emerged from the pattern on the dagger.

She'd used one of the two crests on the dagger to create it.

"Hfft..."

She exhaled briefly, then threw the dagger. It twisted around the guardrail of the balcony, just as she'd planned. The thread emitted a faint light, but thanks to the setting sun, it was virtually invisible.

Menou wrapped the thread around her hand a few times to secure it. The thread was strong enough that it would be difficult to tear even for someone with enhanced power, so it could support Menou's weight without difficulty. She tugged on it lightly to ensure she could safely put weight on the guardrail, then boosted her strength and jumped up without hesitation.

Hanging on to the thread, Menou gave herself over to gravity and swung across the gap.

Akari Tokitou sighed as she rested her chin in her hands.

The room she'd been led to, where she was instructed to rest for the day, was shockingly luxurious.

It was full of authentic-looking antiques, which were used as ordinary furniture. There was no cutting-edge technology, just palpable historic weight and significance—something utterly unfamiliar to a modern girl like Akari. The majestic castle she'd been led through on the way to the room was equally overwhelming.

"I guess I'm in another world..."

She tried murmuring it to herself, but it didn't feel real at all.

She'd been walking to school when she was suddenly transported into an unknown world and given a lavish welcome. Everyone she had met so far had

been kind to her, but she didn't have a very good impression of them.

Somehow, she could just tell: They were deliberately telling her exactly what she wanted to hear.

It seemed like they were doing everything they could to avoid answering her questions, and they were almost certainly withholding important information from her. Even though they were able to understand each other, it was like there was no real communication going on. These people were taking great care to hide their feelings from Akari.

That was how she knew something was wrong.

But it wasn't as if she had any attachment to her life back in Japan, either.

Not even a little. She closed her eyes, remembering the events of the past few days.

Whether at home or at school, there wasn't a single person she could trust.

"Hff..."

Akari gave a little half-sigh.

This world might be different, but she was still the same. It didn't seem there would be dramatic encounters in her future, of that she was sure.

Even in this world, no one would ever be on her side.

Night was falling. What would she be doing if she were still in Japan right now? She probed her memories, but after the dizzying events of the day, she could barely even remember the night before.

Something was definitely wrong.

From the very first moment she opened her eyes in this world, something inside her felt off. The gears weren't quite lining up. Frustration grated in her chest, striking a dissonant chord.

If only she could have some sort of fateful meeting that would change her life.

"What's going to happen to me...?"

Akari had no idea what might lie ahead.

Before she knew it, the evening was deepening into a dark-red sky. The sun sank behind the horizon, signifying the arrival of nightfall. This was a different world. During the day, there was just an ordinary blue sky, but maybe she would be able to see something new when the moon and stars came out.

Would the reality that she was in another world finally sink in? If it actually felt real, maybe something would change.

Curiosity seemed to guide her toward the balcony.

“Huh?”

In that moment, a young woman in a maid outfit landed lightly on the balcony railing, as if she’d just fallen from the sky.

She was beautiful; her faint-chestnut hair, so light it nearly melted into the red of the setting sun, was pulled back in a billowing ribbon. As soon as Akari laid eyes on her, it felt as if time had stopped.

Tick. It sounded as if the gears of a watch were clicking into place in her chest.

Their eyes locked at almost point-blank range.

“.....”

The unexpected encounter was so startling that even Menou froze for a moment on the balcony rail. Even the experienced Executioner hadn’t expected her target to step out onto the balcony just as she arrived.

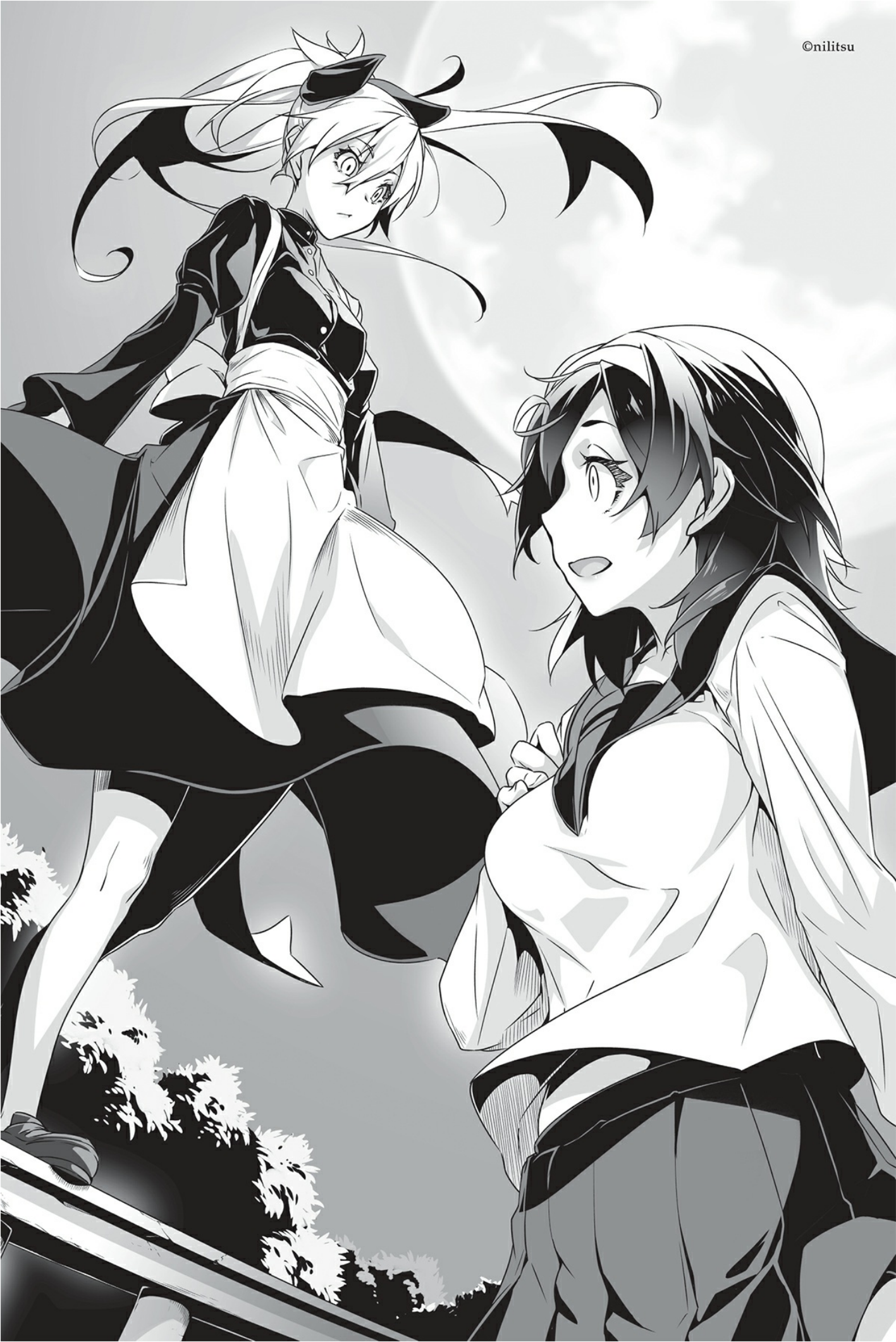
“Hwuh?”

Never in Akari’s wildest dreams would she have imagined this newcomer was here to kill her. With wide eyes, she blinked at the person on her balcony.

“Er. So. Whose maid are you, exactly...?”

“I’m not anybody’s maid.”

The question struck Menou as absurd, even when she remembered she was wearing a housekeeper’s uniform. This girl had clearly lived in peace, if her lack of fear toward an obvious intruder was any indication.



Menou quickly recovered, her thoughts racing.

Trying to convey a sense of urgency, she pointedly made her voice sound strained yet panicked as she addressed the stunned girl.

“Are you—the girl who was summoned from another world?!”

“Huh? Oh, um, yeah.”

“I see. Thank goodness!”

Menou had already knocked out the guards who were keeping an eye on this room. Knowing she wouldn’t be overheard, she observed the girl, analyzing her responses.

The young woman was wearing a headband over her carefully maintained black hair, which went down to her shoulder blades. Her dark, round eyes made her face look a little young, features indicating she wasn’t from the area.

This was almost certainly Menou’s target. And she was wearing a sailor uniform, one of the trademark outfits of a Japanese middle school student—an Otherworlder.

Beneath the scarf of her uniform, her chest was noticeably big. No wonder she had left such an impression on the boy Menou had encountered earlier that day.

Still, it wasn’t entirely impossible that she was a substitute or a body double.

Menou pressed her with rapid-fire questions, leaving the girl no time to think.

“What school do you go to? What year are you and which class are you in?!”

“Eep?! I’m Akari Tokitou, from Nishichou High School! First year! Class Three!”

Her response naturally streamed out of her. Information on Japan was kept strictly confidential, so if she had been acting, it would’ve been a difficult question to answer right away.

I didn’t even ask your name, she thought, irritated. Menou preferred to avoid any information that might risk emotional investment in the target, since she would be assassinating them in due course.

“Very well. Akari Tokitou, huh...? Akari, then. My name is Menou.”

If she could respond with her school name, year, and class that quickly, then she must be the real deal. Now that Menou had learned her name, she decided she might as well use it to make the target trust her more.

“Oh, okay. Menou, right? Nice to meet y—Wait, huh? Why did you...? What?”

It must have been confusing to be asked her class and year in this world. As Akari’s eyes widened, Menou moved closer to peer into her face and grasp her hand.

“I am a member of the Faust. We’re getting you out of here, Akari.”

“Fau...wha—? Wh-what does that mean? You just dropped out of the sky, and now you’re gonna take me away?”

“You’re being deceived by the Noblesse of this nation.”

“Whaaat?!”

Akari’s voice was half-confused, half-astonished.

This wasn’t a bad reaction, Menou thought. She didn’t immediately deny Menou’s claim that she was being deceived. That meant the Noblesse who had summoned Akari hadn’t won her trust yet.

“Listen, Akari. The truth is, there was another one of you.”

“Another...?”

“I knew it. They didn’t tell you... There was another person summoned here from Japan, a boy. He found out about the Noblesse’s plans and ran away. He shook off his pursuers and managed to escape to the church, but by that time, his wounds were beyond healing...”

Menou put on a grave expression and lowered her head. At this point, she didn’t feel any hesitation about lying to lead on the target.

“But in his final moments, he told us about you. We couldn’t save the other boy, but we’ll at least save you!”

The story was riddled with plot holes, but it only had to seem consistent in the moment. Acting even more urgent, Menou pushed on.

“You must have some kind of power, right? These people are trying to use

you.”

“Y-yeah. They told me something about that and had me try it a few times, and, um... Basically, I can heal other people’s wounds, or something. They’re probably trying to take advantage of that...?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Just like that, Akari gave her the information she wanted: Her ability involved healing.

Gotcha, Menou thought, but she didn’t let it show as she kept talking.

“The Noblesse of this nation are not good people. They’re royals who will find a way to profit off any power, even something as gentle as the ability to heal. So we have to get out of here right now!”

Akari caught her breath at Menou’s words.

She wasn’t necessarily persuaded by what Menou was saying, but she was getting swept up in the sense of urgency. Confirming her assessment of Akari’s emotions, Menou smiled at her warmly.

“Don’t worry, Akari. I’m on your side.”

Akari’s face had the obvious confusion of someone who couldn’t keep up with the situation. It suddenly flushed pink.

Something Menou said must have struck a chord, because Akari’s eyes sparkled as she firmly took Menou’s hand.

“Okay. I trust you!”

With that, Akari turned away from Menou and went back into the room. Immediately, Menou dispelled her crest conjuring. The dagger, which had been secured against the guardrail, fell straight into Menou’s hand as the thread disappeared.

“Thank you. I shall do everything I can to prove worthy of that trust!”

Returning the dagger to the strap on her thigh, Menou followed Akari off the balcony and into the room.

The reason she had deceived Akari with her honeyed words was out of

caution for the girl's powers.

Unlike the knights, whose strength and schemes were easy to deduce, even the most inexperienced Otherworlder could harbor the potential to destroy Menou with a single ability. There were too many variables to risk fighting one head-on.

Thus, whenever Menou came into contact with them, she always pretended to be an ally at first.

And now she'd already learned this target's skill.

"Come out into the hallway."

"Okay!"

Having ensnared her target through this brief conversation, Menou went in front of Akari and cautiously led the way down the corridor.

Akari was all but completely vulnerable. Even if Menou attacked her from the front, there was no way this Otherworlder could defeat her. And since she now knew that her ability couldn't be used to strike her, there was no reason to delay any longer.

Turning a corner as she led Akari down the hallway, Menou enhanced her powers and jumped upward.

When Akari turned the corner moments later, she didn't see Menou anywhere, and she immediately started to panic.

"Wha...? Huh?! Menou...? Where did you—? Eek?!"

From Akari's perspective, she must have assumed something had fallen on her. Menou had jumped as soon as she was out of sight, slamming down onto Akari's shoulders knees-first with all her weight.

Unable to withstand the surprise attack, Akari crashed to the floor facedown. There was a painful crack—she must have hit her forehead on the floor—but that didn't matter to Menou. She held Akari's head in place with her knee, pinning the girl in place, and drove her dagger into the back of Akari's neck.

A normal person would die instantly before they even felt the pain, but Menou still remembered what had happened earlier. Unable to deny the

possibility of the target surviving against all odds, she immediately jumped away after stabbing her.

Guiding Force: Connect—

Just as she suspected, Menou felt the activation of this power like she had with the boy.

Menou stayed far back enough that Akari wouldn't notice her and watched the girl closely, her scripture and dagger at the ready.

The girl had said she had healing powers. She might try to restore her own body from the brink of death.

S?T?i?K???Pure Concept [Time]—

Guiding Light surrounded Akari's body as the conjuring began.

What was going on? Menou kept her eyes fixed sharply on the unnatural formation of Guiding Light.

As Menou watched with bated breath, the buzzing particles slowly began to take shape, shifting from chaos into an unbelievably precise design.

Shimmering in the darkness, the motes of light had taken the shape of a pendulum clock.

The time it displayed was now.

Tick. Right before Menou's eyes, the hand of the clock went backward.

Invoke [Regression]

An instant later, the clock burst apart.

The scattered light faded, making Menou's eyes flicker...and then she heard a voice coming from where the light had been.

"Oww..."

It was Akari.

She was groaning, her eyes tearing up from pain. Most strangely of all, she wasn't clutching the back of her neck where Menou had stabbed her; she was rubbing her forehead where she'd hit the floor.

“Wh-what was that?! Something fell on me! And where is Me—? Oh, there you are!”

Akari looked around, still teary-eyed, and stood up when she spotted Menou.

All Menou could do was silently stare as the girl ran up to her.

Under no circumstances could this be considered “healing.” Not in the slightest.

There wasn’t even a scar where Menou had stabbed the back of her neck. In fact, the blood that had soaked her sailor uniform was gone.

“Menou, are you okay?! I thought you disappeared, but maybe I imagined it?! Well, whatever! Let’s just keep moving!”

“...Yeah.”

Fortunately, Akari seemed to have no idea of the strangeness that had just transpired.

As far as Menou could tell, Akari’s consciousness seemed to have picked back up right after she died. There was no indication of lying or acting.

It was technically possible that Akari was an even better actor than Menou, but somehow that theory seemed unlikely.

Between the blustering Akari in front of her and the bizarre conjuring Menou had just witnessed, a certain hypothesis was forming in Menou’s mind.

Not a single wound. Resurrection. And the Guiding Light that manifested in the shape of a clock.

It seemed impossible...but what if her ability wasn’t healing? What if it was...

“...the Pure Concept of *Time*?”

“Hmm? Did you say something, Menou?”

“...Nope.”

It was all Menou could do to keep her face from twitching.

An ability to meddle with time itself. Akari must have *Regressed* to the time before Menou stabbed and killed her.

A completely illogical ability. One that would prevent a person from dying.

Menou was staring at an impossibility—but she quickly composed herself.

“I’m glad you woke up right away. Are you all right, Akari?”

“Um, y-yeah. I’m fine. ‘Woke up,’ huh...? Does that mean I fainted?”

“Yes. You were attacked out of the blue... I drove off the attacker, but I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

“You don’t need to apologize!”

Menou’s concerned expression and words were enough to convince Akari of the falsehood that she had fainted.

“Thanks for saving me... I’m sorry for slowing you down.”

“You shouldn’t apologize, either. I’m a professional—you’re the victim here, you know.”

As Menou spoke with Akari to maintain her trust, she thought about what to do next.

“You were attacked because I failed to protect you. I’m the one who ought to apologize. But I’m glad you seem to be all right. Let’s get moving. Are you hurt? If you are, just say the word.”

“Yeah, my forehead hurts!”

“Ah-ha-ha, I see.”

Keeping her smile in place, Menou held out her hand to Akari.

“Let’s get you out of here.”

“Okay!”

At the moment, Menou had no way to kill her.

In which case, she had no choice but to stick close to her until she found a method. She would have to maintain control over the Otherworlder and her Pure Concept, keeping watch to make sure Akari didn’t cause any damage even by mistake. On top of that, she had to do it all without Akari suspecting her.

“Oh, right. Before we escape, can I say one thing, Menou?”

“What’s the matter, Akari?”

“I know it might sound strange to say this out of nowhere, but...you know, I’m really happy I met you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. For some reason...meeting you made me really happy. I dunno why, but it was like time stopped ever since I came to this world, and it only started moving again when we met.”

Even though they’d only just met, Akari seemed to have an almost excessive level of trust in Menou. She smiled widely, squeezing Menou’s hand.

“So I’m really glad I came to this world, Menou. I dunno what’s gonna happen here, but I’m just happy I met you. This must be...you know...”

Akari was gripping the hand that had wielded the blade that had killed her just moments ago.

“I think this must be what people call fate!”

“...I see. Well, it certainly doesn’t feel half-bad to hear that!”

Menou smiled. As she did, something prickled in her chest. Ignoring it, Menou kept playing the role of the pure and noble priestess, all so that Akari wouldn’t grow suspicious of her.

Neither of them knew this meeting would alter both their futures.

And so they smiled at each other, even though each knew nothing of the other party.

“I’m glad I was able to rescue you, too, Akari.”

“Yeah, and I’m glad you saved me, Menou.”

At the time, not a soul knew of the fate this would bring about.



It was like something out of a waking dream.

The town was covered in snow. This place of many residents was dyed in white. And amid this pure-white snowscape, a young Menou stood stock-still.

The white scenery was spreading out from the snow-white girl in front of Menou's eyes.

She looked to be somewhere in her late teens. The girl's hair was black, as were her eyes. Her skin had a healthy tan. Her uniform consisted of a light-blue shirt and a navy vest. She wasn't dressed in white by any means—in fact, it was difficult to find any white on her clothes at all.

But for some reason, the girl only registered in Menou's eyes as pure white.

“Aa...aaaah... I'm so sorry...!”

The mysteriously white figure desperately dusted off the snow that was piling up on Menou. She'd created the snow herself, yet for some reason, the girl brushed the snow off Menou as if it was a horribly sinful thing.

The town, buildings and people alike, had already turned white and lost their shape, scattering like fresh snow. Menou was the only survivor. And soon even her own name would be blotted out and become unrecognizable.

She didn't feel any fear.

Menou's spirit had been reduced to white, too. The boundary between herself and the rest of the world was hazy. She could barely tell the difference between herself and someone else. All that remained was her name.

All that made Menou herself was the name Menou, which was the only thing that hadn't turned white yet.

“Why did this...? No...I wasn't... This isn't... Ah, but...someone... I... What have I...?”

As she frantically brushed the snow off Menou, the pure-white girl kept muttering to herself. Her murmured words were unstable as she struggled to string them together. Watching the girl and her air of tragedy, Menou began to feel sad herself.

With her sense of self as faint as it was, she was easily affected by another's sorrow. If someone else cried, Menou couldn't help but mirror that. As Menou's very self began to melt into the whiteness around her, the girl's feeling became her feelings, too.

Even the snow around her seemed to reflect the girl's distress. Their surroundings had all become part of the girl's whiteness.

At some point, the pure-white girl gave up on brushing the snow off Menou and stood clutching her head.

"White... The world...white... I am...white... No, that's not... I only wanted... back to Japan... Ah, I—"

"Just die."

A dagger sank into the girl's head.

It was so sudden that it was almost nonsensical. Even standing right in front of the scene, Menou had no idea what had just happened. It was almost as if the dagger had suddenly sprouted from the pure-white girl's head. A second later, she crumpled to the ground.

Why did this happen...? As Menou looked around in confusion, the scenery flickered.

A portion of the landscape warped like a heat haze.

Then a tall woman with dark-red hair emerged from the distortion.

As Menou stared at her, a ripple seemed to run through her vision.

The color of the tall priestess clashed with Menou's blanched-white spirit. Even here in this pure-white town, where Menou had lost the sense of boundaries between herself and others, this red-haired priestess still clearly stood out as a different person.

"...Who are you?"

“You can’t tell from my clothes? I’m a priestess—pure, proper, and powerful.”

Her self-introduction had an undercurrent of irony, as if she didn’t entirely believe it herself.

But now that she mentioned it, it made sense. The woman was wearing indigo priestess robes, Menou realized. The deep red of her hair left such a strong impression that Menou hadn’t even noticed her indigo clothes.

“White, huh? This certainly is a *Blanch* effect, but...it’s strange. If this were the second coming of *Ivory*, surely there wouldn’t be any survivors. Which means...”

The woman trailed off and placed her palm on Menou’s head.

At the point of contact, something flowed into Menou.

“A connection between our Guiding Forces doesn’t hurt you... I see. Hrmm. You’re far too high-quality to be a mere survivor.”

Removing her hand from Menou, the priestess glanced around.

The entirety of the town had turned white, with no more visible outlines or boundaries left. On top of the piled-up snow lay the pure-white girl who had been stabbed.

Following the priestess’s gaze, Menou noticed the girl’s chest was moving up and down. Shockingly, she must have still been breathing.

Her body began to emit a white light.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept? White?—Invoke [Where...is this...? Who...am I...?]

The white Guiding Light burst forth in all directions.

The whiteness that had once been the town began to gather at a single point. All that was in view was collecting around the dead girl. Except for Menou, everything that had made up the town turned to white and was towering overhead.

“Ha. What a failure—you can’t even die properly, it seems.”

The priestess clearly didn’t fear the colossal mass that contained all that had once been the town. Laughing loudly and mockingly, she held a dagger that

looked puny before the giant.

Ah... Menou felt a deep sense of loneliness settle into her heart.

She was supposed to be somewhere in that whiteness, too. She should have been bleached, drained, and made pure white along with everything else. Somehow, knowing that she had failed to turn into the absence of color, left out of the rest of the group, made her a little lonely.

How sad...

That was the moment that her heart truly grieved.

Then a pillar of light shot upward.

The Guiding Light, formed out of enormous energy, glowed as if to push away the white scenery. The conjuring unfolded all around, creating a church out of the light. The clear sound of a bell rang out, pure-white walls took form, and an untouchable, pristine barrier came into being, complete with a set of heavy gates.

The result was a pseudo-holy ground. It bound the white giant within its walls, and the tolling bell of pure power slowly broke it down with each ring.

But this scene wasn't created by the priestess.

An old woman with a cane had unhurriedly walked up beside her.

"Establishing holy ground with a pseudo-church, eh? I guess I should expect no less from the woman who single-handedly created the defense barrier of Garm, old lady Orwell. It's a flashy move, I'll give you that."

"Heh. I see your fondness for secrecy hasn't changed a bit."

"Don't lump me in with you, old timer. We have very different roles."

The elderly woman was holding the cane with both hands as she walked. Instead of the indigo robes of a priestess, she wore the sacred and dignified clothing of a bishop.

"And I don't think there's any need for you to show up for the execution of an Otherworlder."

"My, but this incident occurred in my very own nation. It's rare for an

Otherworlder to cause harm on such a large scale, so I believe a public official ought to get involved.”

The woman called Orwell turned her gaze toward Menou. There was an unreadable emotion glistening in the old woman’s eyes.

“And who is this girl?”

“A survivor.”

The priestess seemed to have noticed Orwell’s emotional response; she made a casual proposal.

“Will you take her in for me? Surely the noble task of looking after an orphan should fall to someone as pure as yourself, not someone whose job is as dirty as mine.”

“...Oh my. Personally, I think you’d be better suited to caring for her. You recently became a Master, no? You ought to try your hand at more difficult jobs, not just those that come naturally to you. I’m sure that is what our Lord wishes for you as well.”

With that, the old woman simply walked away.

“Ha! That old bag’s learned a thing or two in that long life of hers. I never could pull one over on her.”

The woman laughed heartily, then looked down at Menou.

“So what do you want to do?”

This was a most unexpected question.

The only feeling that arose even slightly in Menou was confusion, and it must have shown on her face, because the woman went on after a moment.

“You’ve got serious conjuring potential, so I thought pushing you off on her might work, but she hoisted you back on me instead. I don’t really care what your future holds from here on out, but what do *you* want to do? If you’ve got any hopes, let’s hear ‘em.”

“Nothing.”

Menou didn’t have any particular dreams or desires.

Her mind, soul, and memories had all been dyed white, leaving behind nothing but her name. She retained enough knowledge to keep a hold on the name, but since her past and everything else had been wiped clean, no spontaneous aspirations came to mind.

“Nothing at all.”

The priestess looked down at Menou, unimpressed by her apathetic outlook on her own future.

“Well, since it’s on the way, I’ll babysit you till we reach the holy land. If you make it there alive, you can do whatever you want.”

The priestess put a hand on Menou’s head, still disinterested.

It was probably just that Menou happened to be the right height for the woman to rest her hand on. She didn’t pat Menou’s head, nor bother to attempt anything as annoying as holding hands.

But strangely, there was nothing unpleasant about it.

To Menou, whose sense of boundary had grown vague except between herself and this woman, there was something reassuringly certain about the touch of her hand.

 Departure

The hole in the church had been hastily patched.

Specifically, the areas of the wall and ceiling that the Otherworlder had erased were covered by lumber and oil-treated cloth. Thanks to Momo, the damage was not too eye-catching.

The morning sun was just beginning to rise. Having safely whisked away Akari from the royal castle, Menou waited for the girl to fall asleep before using the communication altar to report to Orwell.

“I see. An immortal possessor of a Pure Concept... That is troublesome.”

“Yes. At present, I do not have the means to kill her.”

Time regression.

It was a logic-defying ability that could revert physical wounds as if they had never happened. Since it activated after she died, there was no way to stop the conjuring.

As the name implied, a Pure Concept invoked a conceptual phenomenon. Even reducing Akari’s body to ash would be unlikely to stop it; if she was sunk in the ocean, chances were good that she would simply revive in a safe place.

“The even bigger problem is that the Pure Concept that has improperly attached to her soul is none other than *Time*.”

All Pure Concepts were a potential threat, but if it was *Time*, there was a limit to what could be done to defend against it.

At present, all it could do was revive Akari with *Regression*, but if the concept grew within her, who knew what direction it might develop in next? Just thinking about it was terrifying.

Otherworlders had an inherently high aptitude for using Guiding Force. If Akari was in danger and focused her powers to deal with it, her abilities were

bound to grow. Though it seemed contradictory, the only way to safely kill Akari was to protect her and keep her from conjuring until a means of dispatching her could be found.

“About that, Menou.”

Orwell must have noticed that Menou was at a loss as to how to proceed, so she offered her a lifeline.

“Would you be willing to come here for a while?”

“What? But—”

“We have what you need. A ceremonial hall that can eradicate your Otherworlder, right here in Garm.”

Menou had assumed she was referring to the hometown visit they’d discussed on their previous call, but Orwell brought up a different point instead.

“Garm is a city so old that it’s known as the ancient capital, so we have many records and facilities that cannot be found anywhere else. Even if it’s impossible for one individual, my ceremonial hall is capable of destroying an Otherworlder’s Pure Concept.”

“Is that really true...?”

“Quite. But it rarely sees use, since Executioners can usually handle disposing of Otherworlders. Since that Master of yours was so damned talented, we never once even spoke about it. That must be why she never mentioned it to you.”

I see. That made sense.

Menou’s old teacher, the Master with the dark-red hair, was a highly individual person. She lived by the principle of never trusting others and handled everything on her own.

“Can you bring the Otherworlder here? I trust you will find a way to convince her. If the Otherworlder undergoes my ceremony, then your job will be done.”

“Understood. I appreciate your assistance. It’s small wonder you’re considered to be the protector of our world.”

“...Not at all. Try as I might to protect it, I am still inexperienced and reminded

of my shortcomings with each passing day. Especially in cases such as your town."

"But that's..."

She trailed off, caught off guard.

Menou didn't remember anything about her hometown.

An incident in her past had completely blotted out her memories. By now, so much time had passed that she no longer felt sad about it. She had certainly been born in this nation, but at this point, that fact held no significance for her.

While she didn't have any emotional attachments to whatever she'd forgotten, she still felt a prickle of guilt in her chest over her inability to remember anything.

That was a simple reality of having forgotten such things.

"And as I said before, I would like to meet with you and talk awhile."

Orwell smiled. It was difficult to tell whether she knew what was in Menou's heart.

"There's a troubling incident occurring in Garm right now as well. Young women are disappearing, unfortunately enough. If I cannot even save the people within my reach, then my title as archbishop has no meaning."

"Nobody can save everyone. Death comes for all of us sooner or later."

"I suppose you're right. Thank you, Menou. It will take a few days to prepare for the ceremony. Let us discuss the details once you arrive."

"Of course. Thank you very much."

At any rate, the prospect of a solution to the perplexing difficulty of executing Akari was a great relief. Menou lowered her head in gratitude and ended the transmission.

The Guiding Light projecting Orwell vanished.

Now she had a goal for her next course of action.

Leaving the chapel area, Menou entered the room where Akari was peacefully sleeping and stood at her bedside.

The girl's sleeping face was undisturbed, unaware that she was about to be woken. She had thrown herself down on the bed, but her noticeably large chest still moved up and down, and there was an unsightly bit of drool trickling from her lips.

Menou took a deep breath, then let it out slowly.

Changing her focus, she grabbed the blanket and sharply yanked it away.

"Good morning, Akari! Rise and shine!"

"Habweeeeeeuh?!"

With an incomprehensible cry, Akari bolted upright.

"Huh?! What is it?! A fire?! A robbery?! A car crash?! Oh, right... Menou?"

"That's right. It's me, Menou, the priestess—pure, proper, and powerful. Are you awake now, sleeping beauty?"

"G'morning, Menou. Man, you scared me. I thought something had happened while I was asleep again. I mean, this place is kinda old, so it wouldn't surprise me if the church collapsed during the night."

"I'll ask you not to underestimate my faith. As long as the church has pious believers, it will never crumble... Good morning, Akari. Breakfast is ready."

"Kaaay."

Menou responded to the girl's still half-asleep reaction with a smile of feigned affection.

"We must discuss our next course of action."

After the two finished their breakfast in one of the rooms of the church, Menou brought up the subject.

"First of all, we must assume you're being pursued."

"Who, me? ...I've got a more important question. This was delicious. Can I get seconds?"

"I'll explain the situation as simply as I can. And no, there is no more. Know that we do not have the money for such things."

“Awww...”

Akari’s shoulders slumped. The budget they’d been allotted for the mission accounted only for Menou and Momo, so with Akari in the picture, they really didn’t have enough to spare.

Menou looked seriously at Akari, who had devoured her breakfast, appearing a little dissatisfied. To kill her, she had to get this girl to Orwell in the ancient capital Garm. It was very important that she give a reasonable explanation for why they needed to go there now.

“You were summoned here by the Noblesse. We managed to get you out of the royal castle, but we’re still in their territory. Even within this church, we cannot guarantee our safety.”

“Yeah, that makes sense. This church is, like, super old.”

“That’s not important right now.”

The hole made by the Otherworlder was covered only by a cloth. Menou didn’t want to get into the church’s strange state of construction, so she smoothly avoided the topic.

“These people kidnapped you to get their grubby hands on your ability, after all. They won’t give up on you so easily. We ought to leave this church as soon as possible—ideally today. Is that all right with you?”

“Yeah. Sounds good.”

“Excellent. You see, in our headquarters in the holy land, there is a place that takes care of lost lambs like yourself. It’s a place where a lot of Japanese people live.”

Akari nodded, looking impressed.

“Whoa. Does that mean there are more people who come here from Japan like me?”

“That’s right. On a continental scale, I’d say about five or so show up every year. So there’s a moderate amount, at least.”

“Gotcha. Does that mean it’s your job to take them in and stuff?”

“Technically, that’s only part of my job, but yes. You catch on quickly, don’t you?”

She had no difficulty getting the gist of a situation, and she asked the right questions. *I guess she isn’t so foolish after all*, Menou thought with a smile, analyzing Akari’s personality.

“There are some who get summoned and others who happen to end up here by natural chance. Either way, the Japanese consistently come to these parts, so we have a system in place to secure them.”

It was true that the church called Otherworlders “lost lambs” and took care of them.

The church monitored the astral vein and predicted their arrival whenever possible, but there were inevitably some that slipped through the church’s grasp. The public knew about their protection program, which served as a system of reducing the numbers that got away.

“People like you who are called from the otherworld have unique powers called Pure Concepts. Some people will try to come after you so they can use those powers.”

“Oh, they did mention that.”

Akari seemed to have been given a similar explanation from the Noblesse in the royal capital, so she readily accepted this information.

Of course, the general public didn’t know that Otherworlders could bring about massive calamities.

Generally, only a few of the highest-ranking Noblesse and the high-ranking priestesses and undercover workers of the Faust knew the truth, with the exception of some heathens who immersed themselves in forbidden antics and naturally inhabited the world’s dark underbelly.

“Those who are summoned by the Noblesse are often taken advantage of, which is why the church dispatches people like me. I hate to say it, but even your body parts can be used for conjuring, so some of the nastiest villains might take you dead or alive.”

Akari trembled as she realized how easily she could have wound up a victim.

“Waaah! That’s so scary. Since you rescued me, you must be...um, a secret agent! Or a ninja! Thank you, Menou!”

“Don’t mention it. I’m not exactly a ninja, though, just so you know.”

“You sure about that? I think it’s kinda similar... But if this holy land place is where I’m supposed to live, does that mean I really can’t go home?”

“Well, about that, Akari...”

Though the place was officially for protecting Otherworlders, there weren’t any real Japanese people in the holy land. Instead, they housed people who had failed to become Executioners. Individuals who were brought up learning about Japan and had features similar enough that they could pass for Japanese lived out their entire lives there, pretending to be Japanese.

But Menou had no intention of bringing Akari there.

“I didn’t know about this, but it turns out that the ancient capital actually has a ceremonial hall that can send Otherworlders back to their own world!”

“Huh?”

Akari’s jaw dropped.

“I... I can go back to Japan...?”

“Yes! An important member of the Faust called the archbishop told me about it. So you can be sure it’s true!”

Menou smiled reassuringly, but for some reason, Akari reeled back in shock.

“N-no way. I thought we were gonna run away together and have ourselves a grand adventure...!”

“What are you talking about?”

Why does she look so disappointed? Menou maintained her smile and tilted her head in polite confusion, then continued her explanation.

“You have some luck after all. It seems that due to geographical constraints, this returning ceremony can only occur in the hall in Garm, where the archbishop is located. If you had been summoned to a faraway nation, you

would probably have had to stay in the holy land there for a while, but...guess what?! Garm is only half a day from here by train!”

“Ooh!”

Trying to keep Akari from noticing that this development was too good to be true, Menou made a deliberate effort to get her excited, which worked perfectly.

“I spoke to the archbishop, and she said that she’ll prepare the ceremony for you. We shall go to Garm at once, and in a matter of days, you’ll be able to go home, Akari. You can think of your time in this world as nothing more than a little sightseeing jaunt!”

“Wow, Menou! You’re amazing!”

“But of course! A priestess must be pure, proper, and powerful!”

Though Akari seemed cheered by the notion of being able to return to Japan, her expression still held a hint of sadness.

“Man, I’m going back so soon... It feels like a shame.”

“Oh? Aren’t you excited to go home?”

“Huh? I mean, it’s not that I’m *not* excited, but...when I met you, Menou, I felt like I’d been waiting for this moment my whole life, so I’m a little sad. Like I said yesterday, as soon as I laid eyes on you, I thought this was fate!”

“G-goodness, you’re making me blush...”

As Menou scratched her cheek sheepishly at Akari’s exaggerated delight, she inwardly wondered about the girl’s strange reaction.

As she had started to suspect, Akari must not have much of a strong attachment to her family and friends, or perhaps her entire homeland. But it didn’t seem like she was particularly excited about the idea of being summoned to a “fantasy” world, either.

However, she seemed to be strangely fond of Menou.

Menou thought about pressing her as to why, but it had only been two days since their first meeting. They hadn’t bonded closely enough to ask personal

questions, and once they reached Garm, she would no longer need to, since her job would be done.

“Well, let’s be friends until you get back home, Akari.”

“Yeah! I’m looking forward to it, Menou!”

“Very good. Let me explain the details of our journey, then.”

I don’t need to learn anything more about Akari, she reminded herself, putting her doubts aside and continuing the conversation.

“Although, it’s not terribly complicated. Since our trip won’t take us across any borders, we can simply use the train.”

“So there are trains in this world, huh? Cool, cool.”

Since the railroad connected all the major cities and towns in each nation of the continent, travelers by land always depended on the trains. There was a direct line from the royal capital to Garm, so there wouldn’t be any complicated transfers or anything, either.

Menou explained the basic steps and shared some words of warning for once they reached Garm, then looked Akari in the eyes.

“I think that’s about it. Do you have any questions?”

“No, I think I got it. You’re great at explaining stuff, Menou.”

Akari was fairly quick on the uptake, so they were able to finish discussing their cover story easily enough.

Which meant all that was left was to prepare for the journey.

“Wonderful! Then I’m going to go do a bit of shopping. We’ll need a change of clothes for you, tickets for the train, and so on.”

“Ooh, shopping? Can I come with you?”

“No.”

Akari leaned forward eagerly, but Menou curtly shut her down.

“Akari. You’re being followed, remember? We have to avoid anything that would draw attention to you, especially in this town! Those clothes of yours

stand out far too much as it is.”

“Awww... Fine.”

“I’m glad you understand. I’ll be back in a bit. Be a good girl and wait here, all right?”

“Okay. See you soon.”

Menou smiled to comfort the sulking girl, then she departed.

However, instead of heading into town to shop, she went around to the back of the building. Sneaking silently back into the church through the rear entrance, Menou carefully hid her presence from Akari as she went down the steps to the basement.

She opened the door at the bottom of the stairwell without a sound and stepped silently inside.

“Momo. Let’s hear your report.”

“Right away, darliiing!”

Waiting in the basement was Menou’s junior and assistant, Momo. They were about to have a meeting about the actual plan.

Momo delivered her first piece of information in an icy voice.

“Report number one: It made me sooo angry to watch boob-lady eat the food I prepared just for you, darliiing. I should have poisoned her.”

“Nobody asked about that, Momo.”

Menou responded without thinking, since it wasn’t like her dependable assistant to make such a bizarre report.

“Besides, I ate that food, too. I would prefer that you not poison me...”

“Nngh, that’s riiight...”

Momo grumbled, and Menou’s frown deepened. She might just be fooling around, but for Momo to blurt out such refutable nonsense made it seem like she really had lost her cool.

“Now, what’s the situation?”

“The Holy Inquisition of the monarch has formally begun. At present, they’re holding a meeting aaaand are discussing the length of time the defense will be allowed.”

“Understood. No doubt this will leave them little time for other matters.”

Finally, Momo was responding normally.

While Executioners like Menou couldn’t be made known to the public, they knew that an inquisitor had come from the holy land to the royal capital to determine where the official blame fell for this current incident.

Once the trial began, the masterminds behind the summoning would undoubtedly have their hands full. Menou’s side had decided to take this opportunity to go on the move. Bringing Akari along was an unexpected hitch, but Menou had already succeeded at convincing her. There was no reason to remain in the royal capital any longer.

“Sooo, darling. Before we get moving, let’s just execute that girl. Morale is at an all-time high. I’ll kill that boob-lady with my own bare haaands!”

“No. Not yet.” Menou chided Momo, who was clearly getting worked up. *I suppose she’s still inexperienced in some ways.*

“Why not? I know direct attacks won’t do much, but we could at least try slower methods, like poison or medication overdose, nooo?”

“I think not. Any methods that weaken the target might make her Pure Concept go berserk.”

The idea wasn’t bad in theory, but they couldn’t risk it.

Among the taboos that existed in this world, one of the worst was to attempt to break the spirit of an Otherworlder who possessed a Pure Concept.

The Pure Concepts that were improperly attached to their souls were in a perpetually unstable state.

Their minds held the reins to the power they drew from their soul. Guiding Force was generated in the soul, controlled by the will, and suffused the body. If their willpower broke while their body remained intact, the Pure Concept was likely to go haywire and potentially cause serious damage.

“We need that girl to maintain a healthy mind and body until directly before her death. Besides, her ability activates her the moment she dies, remember? We can’t just go killing her willy-nilly.”

Akari’s Pure Concept could very well grow in power just by repeatedly activating *Regression* to revive her. The more times they tested out methods to kill her, the more dangerous it became.

“We mustn’t attempt to kill her in any way but the method with the highest chance of success.”

“Grrr. In that case, I suppoose I understand.”

“Very good. Now, Momo, have you finished the preparations?”

“Of cooourse.”

Momo still looked a little peeved, but she handed Menou the things she had already purchased.

It was everything they needed for the journey, including a change of clothes for Akari. Menou couldn’t actually leave Akari alone and unsupervised in the church, so she’d asked Momo to get things ready in advance. Menou checked over the items, impressed with Momo’s skillfulness. Finally, she asked to see the train tickets.

“Right here. They’re for this afternooon.”

“Great. Thank y—”

The destination was the ancient capital Garm, where Orwell would be awaiting them. Once they got on the train, they would reach it in less than half a day. Menou started to express her gratitude and take the tickets, but then she froze.

Momo had bought three tickets.

“...Momo.”

“Whatever is the matter, darliiing?”

Momo smiled innocently, as if to say she couldn’t possibly have made a mistake.

However, Menou wasn't falling for her assistant's act.

"As we've already discussed...you are to stay here and keep tabs on the Holy Inquisition."

"I'd rather diiie."

Momo's tone left no room for debate.

She wore her usual smile, but since they'd known each other for so long, Menou knew what was really going on. At times like these, Momo would never budge, no matter who she was talking to.

Originally, this was where they were supposed to split up.

After the mission was over, Menou would escape on her own, and Momo would stay here and rendezvous with the Holy Inquisition. Before, Momo had agreed, however reluctantly, to the plan of taking separate routes across the border and reconvening later.



But now that the monkey wrench—Akari—was thrown into the mix, Momo was rebelling.

“Listen, Momo...”

How could she talk down her assistant, who was clearly determined to come with her? Menou hesitated for a moment before deciding to appeal to her sense of logic.

“It’s the nature of this mission...well, specifically Akari. If I were to make a mistake, you would need to deal with Akari. Considering that possibility, we have to make sure she doesn’t find out about you, no matter what. You must understand.”

“But, darliiing...”

Ah. I shouldn’t have tried to use logic on her when she’s being this way.

Momo’s whiny tone made it clear she wasn’t listening to a word of Menou’s argument. She gave a wheedling smile.

“I would rather force the Holy Inquisition to end by killing every last member of this nation’s Noblesse myself than let my beloved darling travel alone with that doltish, big-boobed Otherworlder. I’ll go with you even if it kills me, okaaay?”

Her eyes were deadly serious.

Most disturbing of all, it wasn’t even a threat. The way her speech spilled out in one breath, her gaze full of darkness, made it painfully clear that she was all too willing to act on her words.

“That woman is dangerous. My Momo sense tells me so! It says I mustn’t ever let you be alone with her, darliiing!”

“I’m fully aware of the danger she poses.”

“No, you are nooot! You don’t get it at all, darliiing!!”

Momo pounded her fist on the desk furiously, but Menou understood the danger perfectly well.

The Pure Concept of *Time* transcended even death. The danger of this ability

was far more than simply protecting its user from dying. Of course, Menou would be on her guard at all times.

Which was why Menou firmly reassured her assistant.

“It’ll be fine, Momo. Believe in me!”

“Grrrrr!” Momo growled in a way that made her dissatisfaction very clear, her eyes narrowing. “Fiiine. I agree to disagree...”

“Oh, good. So you understand.”

“I’ll just follow you in the shadooows.”

Ah. She doesn’t get it at all.

“I swear I’ll make sure that boob-lady never sees me. Let me go with yooou!”

“In the shadows? Momo, this is...”

Menou resisted the urge to rub her temples.

Knowing Momo’s skills, she *could* pull it off. In the monastery where they were raised and trained to be Executioners, their education included a thorough mastery of stealth. Since Momo had made it out of that monastery at the young age of fourteen, she was more than qualified. Among the assistant Executioners, she was already recognized as a rookie with a bright future.

Menou glanced at Momo.

Her posture made it clear she wasn’t willing to yield any further.

Menou sighed. “All right. Fine.”

“Hooraaay! Oh, and, darliiing...”

“What is it?”

In all truth, having her assistant around would expand Menou’s options. After she reluctantly agreed, Momo hesitated a little, then tacked on yet another request.

“I have one more suggestion, or perhaps you’d call it an appeal, buuut... you’ve never spent so much time with a target before, right?”

“Hmm? I suppose not.”

Until now, Menou had taken care of most of her missions very swiftly. Part of the reason was that she was following the example of her teacher, who had carried out more hunts of heretics than anyone else.

“What about it?”

“Since this mission involves being with the target for an extended period, please let me do it instead.”

Momo’s expression was earnest.

For once, she dropped the usual sugary tone and elongation of her words, looking Menou right in the eyes and speaking hesitantly but clearly.

“I don’t think this mission...suits you, darling. If you would trade roles with me, I could take her to Garm instead. I’m sure you could easily convince that girl to go along with it, even if we did it now.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Menou shut her down immediately, but Momo pressed the subject.

Why?

It was simple.

Menou didn’t want Momo to kill her.

This target wasn’t a heretic who’d willfully indulged in breaking some taboo, or a warrior willingly risking her life in battle, or a criminal who’d committed grave sins. She was just a good person who’d done nothing to deserve getting dragged into this.

It was foolish. Menou knew that. Momo had chosen to become an Executioner of her own free will. Sooner or later, she would have no choice but to kill someone like this.

But even so...

“This is my job.”

As long as Momo was working under her, Menou had no intention of backing down on this matter.

Momo lowered her eyes and bit her lip.

“It’s only for a week or so. If what Archbishop Orwell said is true, it’ll all be over within three days of reaching Garm.”

The tickets Momo had handed her were for a train leaving that very afternoon. Even if the trip went a little slowly, they would certainly be in Garm by tomorrow.

Including today, that made two days total. Orwell said the preparations for the ceremony would take a few days, so it was likely they would end up staying in the city a little while, but it would be finished within less than a week.

That still fell within the range of a short mission, most likely.

“I’m not going to slip up in such a short time. It’ll be fine, I promise you.”

“I hope you’re right...”

Momo kept chewing on her lip.

“...But that’s not exactly what I’m worried about, you knooow.”

Momo’s parting murmur rang bitterly in Menou’s ears.



White was all around them.

As young Menou traveled with the red-haired priestess, they constantly had to deal with taboo and heresy. Beginning her journey from her erased hometown, Menou witnessed many tragedies on these travels. She was all too familiar with the foolishness of the world and the folly of humanity, but even then, she was shocked by the sheer whiteness of the place where they were now standing.

The sky was hidden behind clouds, and the ground itself was nothing but white as far as the eye could see. It spread out in every direction, so surreal that one could lose all sense of distance—and everything else.

“Can you believe it? This place used to be a continent crowded with residents.”

Menou couldn’t believe it.

The ground crunched underneath the soles of her shoes, but it wasn’t gravel. It was salt, rising in faint clouds with every footstep.

The land itself was encrusted with salt.

“It used to be a huge continent, too, but since it turned into a mass of salt, it’s slowly been melting into the sea. Now it’s basically just a big island, and I’m sure someday soon it’ll be gone completely.”

The scale of this destruction was so vast that Menou could scarcely imagine it.

Crunch. Crunch. The red-haired priestess kept walking.

“Look at this.”

There was a single sword piercing the ground.

“It’s the Sword of Salt. A sword that could easily destroy this whole world.”

The blade didn’t look sharp at all; it seemed brittle enough that it might break

if you prodded it with a finger. While the white sword didn't look like it served any practical use, it was the source of a massive calamity once caused by a Pure Concept.

It was the very incarnation of purification, with the power to turn anything it pierced into salt. The range of its erosion was limitless. In fact, it had turned an entire continent once teeming with life into nothing. The land was slowly melting into the sea, and now it was nothing more than a deserted island.

It was entirely possible that the entire world could have met the same fate.

As Menou caught her breath at the unbelievable scale of the transformation, the red-haired priestess turned to her.

“Do you get it now? This is the power of a Pure Concept. Otherworlders can cause massive calamities.”

Human Errors—these calamities on a world-ending scale—were the work of Otherworlders.

“So.” Having brought Menou all this way to the western edge of the map, the priestess spoke carefully. “As you can see, your town's annihilation was no big deal.”

Perhaps she should have been frightened.

The incident in which Menou's birthplace was destroyed was a major disaster. Her memories had turned white and slipped away, but she knew that town must have been precious to her.

However, instead of fear, Menou's thoughts went elsewhere.

Instead of thinking of her town and her memories, which had vanished much like this continent, Menou looked at the red-haired priestess.

This person was a priestess with a dark-red aura who could easily seem frightening.

Did she bring Menou all the way here just to tell her that?

Did they go on this long journey so the priestess could give her some words of comfort about the terrible loss of her town and the fact that she couldn't remember anything about it?

As the possibility occurred to her, a single drop of red sent ripples through Menou's heart.

"I've decided what I want to do."

"Oh yeah? Let's hear it."

"I want to be you."

For a moment, just the briefest moment, the red-haired priestess looked surprised.

"...I don't get it. You saying you wanna be like me? I'm a villain, you know."

"I thought you were a pure, proper, and powerful priestess."

"Are you so stupid, you don't even understand sarcasm?"

Menou could tell the priestess was trying to dissuade her, but she made her request anyway.

"I still want to be like you."

That's what her pure-white soul and spirit had started to hope for because of a single drop of dark red.

The white town where her life started, the sacrilegious job of the priestess, and the plain of salt that surrounded them now all solidified Menou's feelings.

"You prevent things like what happened to my hometown."

It was the priestess's blade that saved Menou in the white remains of her town.

"If you say you're a villain, then I'll become a villain, too."

"Idiot." The priestess stared at her like she was unbelievably stupid. "Just become a normal priestess, then. You might manage to actually be a pure, proper, and powerful one, you know?"

"I know."

"You're choosing the wrong path in life. You can still change your mind now."

"I know."

Menou knew she had other choices, but she still gazed steadily at the red-

haired priestess.

The so-called villain who had sarcastically introduced herself as pure, proper, and powerful.

“...Tch. You’re hopeless.”

The woman turned on her heel and started walking, and Menou chased her and grabbed the sleeve of her robes.

As she walked alongside the priestess, who looked terribly cross, Menou stole a glance at her face.

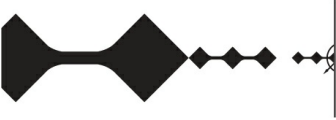
“Could I ask what your name is?”

“Flare... You know what? Just call me Master.”

“Yes, Master.”

That was the day young Menou decided to become an Executioner.

In that land of salt, where she arrived after her family, friends, and hometown had all turned white—for the first time, Menou felt like she had an answer.



Terrorist Express from the Royal Capital



The platform of Central Station in the royal capital was bustling with people.

Since the train connected many important towns and cities, it was the best way of getting around in this world. In addition to the transportation of cargo, it was used by all kinds of people. This platform was probably the only place where one could regularly see so many of the Commons, Noblesse, and Faust all mingling in a crowd.

In the midst of this hustle and bustle, a single child tripped on the ground.

It was a very young girl who'd been looking around uncertainly as she walked, perhaps separated from her parents. With the shock of the fall adding to her already anxious state, her eyes began to fill with tears.

Ah, she's going to cry.

As everyone around her thought the same thing, one lone girl knelt down and looked the child in the eyes.

"Oh dear, are you okay?"

It was a young woman around fifteen or sixteen years old with black hair.

Her timing was perfect, mere moments before the child would have started bawling. Instead, since a nice lady was talking to her, the little girl managed, just barely, to hold back her tears.

"Who are you...?"

"Hmm? Oh, I'm Akari. I'm a supernormal, ordinary person. Nothing weird here!"

Despite her claims of being "supernormal," the girl was actually pretty enough that it was almost unusual.

Her silky hair reached down to her shoulder blades, and her dark eyes sparkled with light as she looked at the little girl. Though her face made her appear young, her body had the decidedly soft curves of a young woman. Her contrasting beauty was enough to catch plenty of attention in the crowd, but her well-made clothes helped her blend in.

Dressed lightly in loose-fitting garments to avoid drawing attention, the girl called Akari beamed at the fallen child.

“You tripped, huh? I get that. Hurts, right? That happens to me, too. But you didn’t cry, so you must be a very strong girl!”

Akari patted the child’s head as she checked her injuries. Having drawn her attention away from the pain with her sympathetic words, she pointed at the little girl’s scraped knee.

Raising the index finger of her hand as it peeked out of her wide, loose sleeve, Akari drew a circle in the air.

“Pain, pain, go away. Come again another day!”

Guiding Force: Connect—NT?i?KC, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Regression]

Akari’s raised fingertip glowed ever so slightly.

The words of her little charm had activated a conjuring. The Guiding Light from her fingertip surrounded the child’s wound, erasing the scrape on her knee as if it had never been there.

“Wha—?”

The little girl’s eyes widened, almost forgetting that she was on the verge of tears as her wound disappeared like a magic trick. She looked back and forth between the spot where the pain had been and the lady who had made it go away.

The young lady with the white headband puffed up her chest, looking extremely pleased with herself.

“Heh-heh. Bet that doesn’t hurt anymore, r—?”

“Hiya!”

“OW?!”

Her triumphant face was abruptly met with a chop to the head.

Looking around in a panic for the enemy responsible, Akari discovered a pretty young woman in the garb of a priestess.

“M-Menou?! What was that for?!”

“‘What was that for?’ My foot.”

Menou’s lovely features were pulled into a tight scowl, light-chestnut ponytail whipping back and forth as she shook her head. The slit in her long skirt revealed more than a glimpse of her right thigh.

“I told you not to do anything that makes you stand out, yet as soon as I take my eyes off you, here you are...”

“I’m not standing out! Not until you chopped me on the head, anyway! That was a cruel and unusual punishment, if you ask me!”

“Wow, you have no self-awareness... I’ll have to educate you from the ground up, starting by teaching you some common sense.”

“Awww, what?”

The child watched their exchange in blank confusion.

The nice lady healed her wound with a mysterious power, but then she got hit on the head. The situation was a bit too much for a five-year-old to follow.

“I’m sorry. This lady here is a bit of a weirdo. Now, you must be confused about how your scrape disappeared, hmm? Heh, well, conjuring is amazing. Here, let me show you a little something.”

Noticing the child’s confusion, Menou put on an act like a typical traveling priestess, holding out a single coin.

Once Akari and the little girl were both focused on it with curiosity, she drew power from her soul.

Guiding Force: Connect—Five-In Coin, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Bubble]

The coin glowed faintly with Guiding Light from Menou’s power, then produced glistening bubbles.

“Ooh!”

“Whoa! Cool!”

Looking up at the floating bubbles of light, the little girl exclaimed in wonder. Akari added in an impressed exclamation, too.

“Wow! How’d you do that?! Are they bubbles?! They don’t seem to pop!”

“Heh-heh! Impressive, no? ...Well, it’s really just that there’s a crest on all coins and paper money, which can be used as a medium to cast a trifling spell. I can even control the movements of the bubbles a little.”

Menou explained the trick to Akari, who was as excited as the little girl.

In this world, it was the church’s job to issue currency. Including crests on the coins and paper notes also served as a measure to prevent counterfeit money.

“Paper money and coins all bear designs featuring famous saints. The conjuring each one can invoke is related to stories of that saint.”

“Whoa! Really?! What kind of stories?”

“Well, the five-*in* coin is associated with the legend of Saint Marta and the moon. The bubbles are meant to represent the moon.”

Menou prodded a nearby bubble as she explained to the excited Akari.

She willed the bubbles to move into lines, circles, and a smiley face. As Akari and the little girl chattered about the bubbles, the passing crowd looked at them with warm fondness. All of them had memories of priestesses telling stories of saints while entertaining them with conjuring, as Menou was doing now.

Hopefully, that distracted her from her wound disappearing, Menou thought as she tucked away the coin.

Just in time, the little girl’s mother came over, honing in on the commotion. Like Menou and Akari, it seemed they were taking the train to Garm as well. They were in different cars, so they parted ways—the mother looking apologetic and the child happily waving.

Menou waved back at them until they were out of sight, then whirled on

Akari.

“Now. I warned you, didn’t I, Akari? Don’t do anything that might draw attention. You’re being pursued, remember?”

“B-but all I did was heal a teeny little—*meep*?!”

“No buts.”

Menou pinched Akari’s cheek and glared into her eyes.

“We were able to gloss over it this time because it was a child. But you should know, there’s no conjuring in this world that can heal people’s wounds.”

“Huh?” Akari blinked, looking surprised. “But magic exists in this world, right?”

“Of a sort, though we call it conjuring here. But it’s not the sort of thing ordinary people can use easily, and there’s no conjuring in existence that can instantly heal an injury.”

Conjuring couldn’t be used by just anyone, although it wasn’t exclusively reserved for the church. The scene with the light bubbles stood out a little, but even if it caught some people’s attention, it was necessary camouflage to hide the fact that Akari had erased an injury.

“So be more careful.” Menou bopped Akari lightly on the head with her fist.

“Ouchie.”

“Conjuring isn’t all-powerful, you know. That’s why people are after you, Akari. Refrain from using your powers.”

“Awww. Okaaay. Whatever you say, Menou!”

“Very good.”

Akari’s response was lighthearted, but Menou nodded in satisfaction at her earnest response.

“All right, let’s get on the train. We’ll be traveling at night for part of it, but I wasn’t able to get a sleeping car, so we’ll have to make do with normal seats. Be prepared for that.”

“Uh-huh. No problem!”

Akari grinned and puffed up her chest.

They boarded the train, and before long, it departed the station without a problem. But a few hours later, as if by design, the train that carried Menou, Akari, and Momo was caught up in a terrorist attack.

The wheels of the trains that connected cities and towns across the continent were propelled by a Guiding engine.

The energy stored within the engine was expended to turn the wheels, spraying sparks of Guiding Light into the air as the train left the station. The first-class carriages near the front of the car, where the ride was the smoothest, were reserved for nobility and separated into luxurious individual rooms.

The girl in this particular first-class carriage was unmistakably a noble.

She had a shock of strawberry-blonde hair that shone in the sunlight, and eyes as blue as a clear summer sky. Her lightweight dress exposed a great deal of skin on her back and sides, flaunting her gorgeous figure.

In the seat next to her was a sword engraved with an elaborate crest.

She had no guards or attendants. Even alone, her high class was obvious. The young lady was incredibly elegant, though it was more of an overpowering superiority than a modest refinement. The confident look in her steely eyes reflected both her beauty and the strength of her will.

As she gazed out the window, she heard herself speak.

“Father has been such a fool.”

The young woman’s father was the king of this nation.

Just yesterday, the king had crossed the line by summoning Otherworlders. And now he was being branded a heretic for that transgression.

The girl guessed her father’s motives and deemed him a fool without hesitation.

The king reigns but does not govern.

That was the position of the Noblesse.

Invariably, the Faust were always above the Noblesse. While the Second

Estate was in charge of unifying the Commons and presiding over the nation, the First Estate—the Faust—held the keys to all the world’s most important secrets.

Even with the titles of nobility or royalty, the Noblesse did not even have their own armed forces. Matters of law universal across continents, such as trials and the minting of currency, fell under the Faust’s domain. And the Noblesse were further restricted by the many techniques and technologies deemed taboo, and so it was virtually impossible to make any shrewd moves as a politician.

And yet, the Noblesse were considered the ruling class. It was laughable.

Thus, it was small wonder that the Noblesse occasionally delved into the forbidden and attempted to gain enough power to rebel against the Faust.

Ashuna would not censure that yearning to become stronger; however, she did not approve of the means her father had chosen.

“Otherworlders? Ha. They’ve already failed in the past.”

Long ago, there was a civilization in this world that prospered with the help of Otherworlders’ knowledge and their Pure Concepts, but they still fell to ruin.

And this time, it seemed the summoned Otherworlders had not even left corpses behind.

This was likely the work of the so-called Executioners often whispered about in rumors. As was the disappearance of that small squad of elite knights who vanished without even the slightest of successes.

However, the sin of summoning had been exposed, even though it yielded nothing of value, and so an official Holy Inquisition had begun.

Ashuna was the daughter of the king, but she had been deemed unconnected to this incident and released. As staying in the royal capital brought her nothing but unrest, the free-spirited young woman was traveling alone to the ancient capital Garm, where she planned to cross the border and leave the nation.

It was true that she was not involved in the summoning, and the church was not so cruel as to implicate someone for the mere crime of being related to the suspect.

The incident would soon reach its resolution, yet Ashuna still harbored a single doubt.

Her royal family did not have the knowledge or technology to attempt a summoning. And yet, her father succeeded so definitively that he was now on trial for heresy.

“Now then, what sort of plot was my father caught up in, and who was behind it?”

As she murmured aloud to herself, there was a flurry of footsteps outside her door.

The sound was far too boisterous to be permitted in the noble carriage. A moment later, the door to her private room burst open unceremoniously, and several armed men clustered inside.

“Beg pardon. You are Her Highness Ashuna, correct?”

The ill-mannered men surrounding her were carrying guns charged with Guiding Force. As they pointed them at the princess, Ashuna looked down the barrels with a bored expression.

“Indeed. I am Ashuna Grisarika, the youngest daughter of the king of this nation’s Noblesse.”

Despite having weapons trained on her, the young woman showed no trace of fear, and she introduced herself in spite of the sudden development. Her unshaken, even haughty attitude confused the men who were pointing their guns at her.

As their aim wavered, the young woman rested her chin on one hand and grinned ferociously.

She would never debase herself. Even though she was fully aware the Noblesse were hardly any different than a pet dog on a leash, her pride never wavered.

“Now then, who are you scoundrels with the nerve to point weapons at me?”

Ashuna Grisarika addressed the ruffians with all the dignity of a monarch.

The train had been hijacked by terrorists shortly after boarding.

“Listen up! Don’t even think about resistin’, all right? With this many hostages, we don’t give a damn if we lose one or two of ya!!”

Menou kept her eyes on the two men who were shouting threats as they roughly corralled the passengers to the back. They seemed accustomed to violence, so perhaps they were failed adventurers returning from the Wild Frontier. It was all well and good to try to strike it rich in no-man’s-land, which divided the areas inhabited by humanity, but many people fled and turned to a life of crime, unable to withstand the harsh elements.

“M-Menou...”

“It’ll be fine.”

Akari looked anxious, so Menou reassured her briefly.

The terrorists seemed to be planning to hijack the entire train. Currently, they were trying to gather all the passengers in Menou and Akari’s carriage into one place.

If they were armed and not working for the Noblesse, then they must be terrorists from the Commons, under the guise of a “citizen’s group.” Menou wasn’t sure of their motivations, but at least they didn’t seem to be after Akari.

In that case, Menou’s greatest concern became their weapons.

“These guys are scary. They’ve even got guns and stuff. Wait, I didn’t know there were guns in this world.”

“There aren’t. Well, technically there are, clearly, but they’re forbidden. No one is supposed to have them.”

“Huh? But those guys do.”

“They do indeed.”

As Akari blatantly whispered in her ear in spite of the situation, Menou responded without taking her eyes off the terrorists.

Guns were a designated taboo and thus considered heresy. Production, distribution, and possession of guns were all forbidden.

However, it was difficult to stamp them out entirely.

Even if people weren't producing them by hand, the Mechanical Society, which ran rampant in the eastern Wild Frontier, continued pumping them out, so any person strong enough to make it back alive from that area could obtain them. Most of them were Guiding guns, not the type that used gunpowder, but both varieties were equally deadly.

The problem was that the men in front of them now didn't look strong enough to acquire the weapons on their own.

"You *can* get those in the Wild Frontier, but..."

"The Wild...huh? What's that?"

"We're in a bit of a high-pressure situation right now, so I'll have to teach you the basics later."

The Wild Frontier was an area where the environment was so harsh that it had been deemed uninhabitable and abandoned by civilization at large. It was far too dangerous for anyone to make their way into the area without considerable power and ability.

So who had sold Guiding guns to these men? Menou's thoughts raced while she whispered with Akari. One of the men stepped in front of them.

"You guys are next. Just keep your mouths shut and make your way to the back—dammit. A priestess?"

As the man started to give orders, he noticed Menou's clothing and scowled.

"Good day, Mr. Terrorist. I am but a humble clergywoman and ally to the Commons. Is there a problem?"

"Bah. Aren't you a cheeky one, little miss priestess?"

Her clothes were a dead giveaway.

It was common knowledge that the priestesses of the Faust were conjurers. Even without knowing that Menou was secretly an Executioner, no one would doubt the power of a priestess. Obviously, having a conjurer among their hostages would be a problem.

The man furrowed his brow in frustration at Menou's standoffish challenge, but he simply flashed his gun at her.

“I’d go quietly if I were you, priestess. If you’re part of the Faust, you must know what this is.”

As designated taboos, Guiding guns weren’t common knowledge to everyone, but any priestess would be familiar with their power.

Nastiest of all, the man threatened Menou by pointing the barrel at the other hostages.

“...Yes, of course. I won’t put up a fight.”

Now that she had a sense of his character, Menou made a show of reluctant obedience.

“Glad to hear it. You priestesses can be tricky. I’m gonna have to keep you in my sight. Let’s start with placing your scripture on the floor and sliding it over to me. And, hmm...”

The man trailed off, his eyes wandering to Menou’s thigh where it peeked out of the slit of her skirt.

“...Heh. Guess I better have you get undressed, too. Ya might be hidin’ a weapon under there.”

“.....”

It’s a good thing Momo is in a different car.

Rather than expressing disgust, Menou’s first reaction was relief.

If Momo had been present, she would have gone after the man’s life with zero regard for the safety of the hostages. And she’d use her particularly nasty methods, too.

Since Menou could envision that outcome with absolute certainty, she couldn’t help thinking it was a small mercy that Momo wasn’t present. When her assistant went on a rampage, it was extremely difficult to stop her.

“What’s wrong, girlie? You tryna refuse? A noble ally of the Commons is gonna turn her back on these hostages, huh?”

“Oh, enough already. Fine...!”

There really was a dagger strapped to the back of her thigh, so the man

wasn't off base in telling her to strip. Still, Menou had no desire to take off her clothes in front of others.

She reached down, intending to make a show of undressing so she could draw the man's attention and then knock him out while he was distracted. But Akari stepped in front of her.

"W-wait a second!"

"Hunh? What's this now?"

"D-don't be mean to Menou!"

Akari was trying to bravely protect Menou, but she was obviously scared. There were tears in the girl's eyes, and her hands were shaking.

Even so, she reached up to undo the ribbon at her breast, then opened the top button on her blouse.

"If someone has to strip, then... I-I'll do it instead!"

"Um, what?"

"Huh?"

It was a bold but irrational declaration.

In fact, both Menou and the terrorist tilted their heads in confusion at her bizarre interference.

The man's official reasoning was to disarm Menou, even if it was only an excuse. It made no sense for Akari to get undressed in her stead.

And yet, Akari turned to Menou with her teary eyes full of determination.

"I-it's okay, Menou! I won't let anything bad happen to you!"

"Sorry, Akari. You're not making any sense, so could you be quiet for a minute, please?"

"Yeah, listen to your friend. That isn't—hrmm."

The confused man started to agree with Menou, but then his eyes fell on Akari's chest.

Just by undoing a single button, she'd revealed a considerable amount of skin.

The size of her chest was obvious even under her clothes, but her impressive cleavage was emphasized further by the way she was unconsciously pressing her shoulders inward with fear.

The man's mouth twisted into a foul sneer.



“Heh-heh. All right. You’ll do, I—”

“Enough.”

Menou stepped in front of Akari abruptly, interrupting the man.

To gain her trust as a traveling companion, protecting Akari was the most natural course of action. However, it also happened to align with what Menou’s heart was telling her to do with mysterious and almost irresistible force.

“She’s just a normal girl. Don’t try anything funny with her. All you want is for us to cooperate, right? So here, I’ll start by giving you my scripture. Here you...*GO!*”

“Yea—AAH?!”

Menou distracted the man by speaking rapidly and pretending to put the scripture on the floor, then suddenly shifted gears. Moving faster than the eye could follow, she swung her arm and flung the book with all her might at the other man, who was behind them pointing his Guiding gun at the hostages.

The corner of the heavy tome struck the man squarely in the face.

“Buh?!”

The scripture was thick—easily five hundred pages. Taking such a weighty tome straight to the face was sure to do some damage.

“Aghh...”

“Why, you little... Huh?”

The man who’d been taking the hostages was knocked out immediately by the physical force of the scripture’s impact. The one who’d been accosting Menou and Akari flew into a rage when he saw his fellow go down, but Menou didn’t need any cheap tricks to incapacitate him.

The moment he glanced away, Menou bolted out of his sight to slip behind him. As he looked around in confusion, she knocked him out with a backhanded chop to the chin.

Having swiftly taken down both men, Menou dusted off her hands briskly.

“Well, that was easy.”

Borrowing a belt from one of the male passengers, Menou relieved the unconscious men of their Guiding guns and bound them so that they couldn't move, just in case they woke up. Collecting taboo items was part of Menou's job, but determining their punishment fell to law enforcement, so it was best to apprehend them rather than finish them off.

Akari clenched her fists with excitement and pumped them up and down after witnessing Menou's expert movements up close.

"W-whoa! That was amazing, Menou! You're so strong! No wonder you're such a good ninja agent!"

"Of course. I'm a pure, proper, and powerful priestess, after all... So please stop calling me a ninja, okay?"

Gracefully accepting Akari's praise, Menou turned toward the passengers who had been hostages just moments ago.

As they all watched her with bated breath, she gave them her biggest smile.

"Don't be afraid. It was their misfortune to run into a priestess like me. I'll bring down any ruffians who try to board our carriage!"

"Ooh!" The passengers cheered in amazement and relief at Menou's performance.

That should be enough to keep the civilians calm, Menou thought, turning back to Akari.

"And, Akari, you should know better than to try to protect me. Don't do anything dangerous like that again, all right?"

"R-right. I'm sorry..."

As Menou scolded her, Akari's shoulders slumped. Her actions hadn't been helpful by any stretch of the imagination.

Still, Menou softened her expression a little.

"But thank you for trying... It made me happy that you would be so brave, Akari."

"...Hee-hee." Akari broke into a smile again. "I love how thoughtful you are,

Menou. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it. Now, I’m going to take care of the terrorists in the other cars. Be a good girl and wait here.”

“Kay... But please be careful, okay? I don’t wanna be left behind anymore.”

“Don’t worry. And when have I ever left you behind?”

“Huh? Oh yeah. I guess you’re right. Ah-ha-ha, what am I saying?”

“All right, I’ll be back soon.”

With a little wave, Menou picked up the scripture she’d thrown at one of the hostage takers and headed toward the train car in front of theirs.

Her book glowed faintly with flickering Guiding Light.

It was the signal of an incoming long-distance communication from a linked scripture. Momo was sending her a message.

Menou confirmed the contents of the message as she stepped onto the link between the two carriages, still completely unaware of something.

She still didn’t understand the reason Momo had worried that Menou wasn’t suited to this job.

“Now, I wonder how Momo’s doing.”

It wasn’t a visible change, so she herself didn’t even notice. Thoughtful actions like comforting Akari a few moments ago weren’t actually necessary for her mission at all. In fact, it would be easier to deal with Akari if she simply scolded her and left it at that, encouraging her to be more docile—yet Menou had comforted Akari without even thinking twice about it.

In the face of Akari’s sunny smile, the line between Menou’s acting for her mission and her real feelings was starting to melt away, leaving the two to mix together.

But Menou still hadn’t realize that yet.

The second carriage was equipped with beds.

The terrorists who’d hijacked the train were trying to herd the passengers into the dining car.

Most of the passengers were ordinary Commons folk. Though they bemoaned their luck, they were frightened enough by the weapons that they quietly obeyed.

Once the five men had crowded most of the passengers from the sleeping car into the dining car, two of them went on to the third car. While those two rounded up the passengers there, the remaining three began combing through the sleeping car to ensure they hadn't missed anyone.

Soon, they stood in front of one of the beds, exchanging looks.

"Hey."

"Yeah? Is there a kid hiding here or something?"

The sheet over the bed was rising in an obvious lump. As if that weren't bad enough, the lump was visibly trembling.

"I dunno if it's a boy or a girl, but it sure is a brat. Ugh."

"We oughtta just shoot them. If we toss the body out the window, no one'll know."

"Cut it out... Hey, kid. If ya come out real quiet, we won't hurt ya."

Judging by the size of the bulge, it couldn't be an adult hiding in there.

The frightened child must have hidden so quickly that the men didn't notice the first time. Hoping the kid wasn't going to burst into tears, the men approached cautiously.

Then, suddenly, the white sheet flew upward, blocking the men's view.

"Huh?!"

"Dammit!"

Just as the sheet obstructed their vision, the most sharp-eyed of the men noticed that the "kid" was wearing a priestess's robes. Cursing, he opened fire immediately.

Part of the danger of a Guiding gun is that it's easy to use even for someone unfamiliar with manipulating power. When one pulls the trigger, it automatically absorbs some of the user's energy, hardens it, and shoots it out

as a bullet.

However, the man's attack hit only the bedsheet.

"Guh?!"

The one man who'd reacted immediately to the situation and fired let out a groan. The person who'd nimbly slipped behind the terrorists while the sheet was blocking their vision was throttling his neck with some kind of cord.

Three seconds.

The expert grip on his carotid artery brought the man down in a shockingly short time.

"Damn! A priestess?!"

The other two finally caught on and swung their barrels toward her, but they couldn't pull the trigger. The girl's small frame was completely obscured behind the man's unconscious body.

Seeing the other men hesitate, the girl activated Enhancement. Then, with her boosted arm strength, she threw the man toward the other two with remarkable ease, despite their size difference.

The two men weren't hardened enough to shoot their ally, so they were hit squarely by his full weight.

It happened too quickly for them to brace against the impact of the large-framed man. Perhaps things would have been different if they were able to use Enhancement to strengthen themselves, but these men didn't possess such advanced abilities.

One of them stumbled back, and the other landed on his rear.

The girl closed in on them without a moment's hesitation, punching the face of the still-standing man with a small white-gloved fist.

"Nnguah!"

She struck the man over and over with a mercilessness that was at odds with her soft pink hair and adorable features.

CRACK. The snap of a nose breaking, then a jawbone. The third strike sent a

molar flying, and the man toppled over, unconscious. Her gaze swiveled to the other man.

“D-dammit!”

The man frantically raised his Guiding gun, but by then the girl was already behind him.

“Question.”

There was the crunch of metal as something wrapped around the man’s neck.

“How many of you are there, and what is your goal?”

“...Bah. You think a little rope is gonna make me talk?”

“Rope...? Oh, you can’t see it, so you’re assuming it’s rope. How cute. Unfortunately, I am not nearly that gentle.”

Now that she mentioned it, the man realized his mistake.

The sensation around his neck didn’t feel like rope or cord; there was a coolness to it that identified it as metal. But it felt far too sharp and rough to be any kind of wire.

What was it, then? The man knitted his brow, but just then the girl revealed the answer.

“It’s a coping saw.”

“Huh? Ngaah?!”

The thin metal saw pressed against the man’s neck began to slide.

Its blade dragged across his flesh dully, drawing blood immediately. The girl holding the handle had shifted it slightly in a sawing motion and stopped.

But that was enough to drain the color from the man’s face.

“A...aagh... W-wait, n-no—Stop—”

“I’m going to start sawing through your neck, one second at a time.”

“...Hgggh!”

It was as if she’d breathed ice into his ear.

The sheer coldness of the girl's voice wasn't a result of calmness. It was simply evidence of how little she cared for the man's life.

"Soooo...will you tell me what I want to know, or will your head hit the floor first?"

Despite the drawl, there was no trace of sweetness in the voice that breathed into his ear.

"I'll saw nice and slow until one of those things happens, okaaay?"

In less than a second, the man started spilling all the information she needed.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:4—Invoke [The Lord's will is relayed through all of heaven and earth, reigning far and wide.]

After extracting information from the terrorist and knocking him out, Momo opened to a page of the scripture and charged it with Guiding Force, invoking a conjuring. Her scripture was already linked to Menou's, so it relayed her the information she'd gained and Momo's next plan of action.

The terrorists' target was the princess of this nation, who was in a first-class carriage. They intended to take her hostage to demand the release of their leader, who'd been captured by the Order of Knights.

"How very uninspired..."

This development was of little interest to Momo, but she couldn't neglect gathering information for Menou.

Some of the terrorists had also gone to the economy cars, but there were only two of them. Menou should be able to handle them without a problem. It was strange that they were carrying taboo weapons like Guiding guns, but even then, they didn't pose much of a threat.

The problem was the front cars.

There were three men in the engine room and eight who had infiltrated the nobles' carriage.

Momo sighed. "It's terribly dull to work without my darling, but... I suppose I should exterminate the pests in the engine room so she'll praise me."

Smiling faintly to herself, Momo reflected on the day when she first met her beloved darling.

After losing her parents, the young Momo was brought to a strange monastery.

There, she and others had undergone unbelievably difficult training, following a terribly strict schedule. Though the place was called a monastery, the unusual system showed absolutely no interest in saving anyone who couldn't keep up with the rigors of life there. Even at her young age, little Momo could tell she'd entered a very strange place indeed.

Many times, a child who had been there the previous day would suddenly be gone the next.

Most of those who disappeared were children with unsatisfactory grades, and none of the adults would say where these children went. However, Momo could imagine how awful their fates must have been.

Momo hated that monastery.

Though they all lived together, the other children her age had no attention to spare for their peers. It was normal to try to kick one another down to get ahead; all that mattered was ensuring one's own survival. The adult priestesses who claimed the role of teachers were cold and cruel, without a trace of empathy or compassion among them. And worst of all was the person in charge of the monastery.

That Master with the dark-red hair was the craziest of them all.

To little Momo, everyone around her was an enemy. She was convinced that she was the only sane person in the place, so she hated everyone else. She easily met and surpassed the requirements of all her training, but she never felt accomplished about any of it. Momo hated every last task that she was forced to do.

Momo was the only real "human" among them, she thought. The rest were all completely insane. She would never get used to an awful place like this, she told herself.

So she spent her days harboring hatred toward the monastery, but at the

same time, she worried that it would eventually begin to influence her. The fear that she might already be going insane was always lurking in her psyche.

And so Momo cried often.

She almost felt that if she could cry, then she was still herself.

When times were tough, it was normal to cry. A child like herself ought to burst into tears when hurt or sad. Momo held on to this thought as she saw the children around her who had long since given up crying.

So when Momo felt like crying, she never held back. She wailed when she was in pain, or when she was upset, or the moment she felt unhappy.

The idea that children are pure and incapable of doing bad things is a delusion of oblivious adults who have long since forgotten the past. In truth, a group of children will immediately take out their stress on anything that seemed weaker than them.

Since Momo sobbed often, the other children saw her as below them, and they once surrounded her and laughed at her. Momo didn't want her crying to be interrupted, so she punched them in the face to fend them off, making sure they all suffered until none of them could cry, either.

After that, nobody dared approach her when she was in tears.

She cried on her own, as much as she wanted.

Anytime bad things happened, she could at least weep about it uninterrupted. That was the one thing she could rely on.

However, one girl who apparently didn't know about that incident approached Momo while she was crying.

The girl was only two years older than her. Whenever Momo was crying alone, this girl with the long, pale-chestnut hair would inevitably come and comfort her.

It was normal to punch someone who approached with ill intent, but otherwise, punching others wasn't normal. So Momo refrained from hitting her, but she still thought it was cruel that this girl insisted on interrupting her little session.

Besides, her “comforting” didn’t involve kind words—or even attempts to distract her with songs and stories.

She just reached out and patted Momo’s head.

It was an incredibly awkward attempt at comfort. At times, Momo even felt she must be mocking her, so she often pushed away the girl’s hand.

Whenever Momo did so, the girl would frown in confusion, but she would still sit next to her until Momo stopped crying.

What a weirdo.

She was even stranger than the others. *This one must be insane, too*, Momo thought.

For one thing, she always looked calm, in spite of the hellish place where they lived. She kept on doing normal things as if it were perfectly natural. But if she were really normal, she would cry and scream in protest. Yet the girl still played at being normal, even though she must be broken inside somewhere.

The way her chestnut hair grew long and unkempt was proof that she was deficient.

Like Momo’s pink hair demonstrated, hair color in this world wasn’t determined by genetics alone. If a person’s Guiding Force surpassed a certain amount, the power produced by their soul would naturally influence the color of their hair. Since this girl’s chestnut hair was as faint as if it had been bleached, it was easy to guess that her natural color had been much more vivid.

Before she came to the monastery, something had happened to this girl to drain the color from her soul.

There was no doubt that she wasn’t a normal human.

And yet, every time Momo cried, the chestnut-haired girl approached her, undaunted, and awkwardly tried to comfort her.

Momo couldn’t help but feel a little touched.

She was strange, all right, but she wasn’t doing anything bad.

So Momo decided to allow this girl to sit by her side when she cried.

One day, Momo was crying over a painful blow she'd sustained during training.

As she cried, she suddenly couldn't tell anymore whether the pain was actually enough to be worth crying over. She was so distracted by this thought that her head started spinning, but since she was still crying, she decided she must be all right.

As always, the chestnut-haired girl approached her.

She patted Momo's head as usual in a vague attempt at reassurance. Momo had a sneaking suspicion this was the only method of comforting a person that the girl knew.

But for some reason, that day, she didn't stop there.

Instead, she gleefully produced some red ribbon from her pocket and clumsily pulled Momo's hair into pigtails.

Momo was so distracted by the girl's puzzling behavior that she forgot about her crying and even the resultant confusion. Noticing that Momo had stopped crying, the girl held out a mirror she'd gotten from who knows where.

Then, as the mirror reflected Momo and the ribbons tying her hair into pigtails, the girl smiled proudly and spoke.

"Look how cute."

It didn't make any sense.

It was so bizarre that Momo repeated it without thinking.

"Cute...?"

"Uh-huh. Stylish."

This was the girl's idea of stylish?

"Girls should be stylish. Master taught me that today."

It was already a well-known fact that this girl was a favorite of the red-haired Master who was in charge of the monastery. This impressive feat made her the target of much jealousy.

In this grim monastery, which left the children no energy to spare on others

and no real allies to speak of, the chestnut-haired girl tied Momo's hair into pigtails and patted her head.

"You're cute."

This girl really was strange.

While Momo had stopped crying, that day she allowed the girl to continue stroking her head without resisting.

She's strange. Not normal. But maybe she's not so bad, Momo thought.

The next day, Momo used the ribbons the girl gave her to put her hair back up in pigtails. It was just a whim, of course. Changing one's hairstyle is a normal thing to do, so she wanted to try it. That was all.

In this institution, even having ribbons in her hair was enough to make some of the kids jealous. Momo was in an unusually good mood that day, and when one unwise soul tried to steal the ribbons from her, Momo beat the offending child into the ground and stole their clothes instead.

Momo used the nicest parts of the stolen clothes along with some pilfered thread and a needle to make a scarf ribbon.

As she held the handmade ribbon she'd made for some unknown reason and thought of that girl's long, light-chestnut hair, Momo found herself feeling oddly restless.

That day, the Master gathered all the kids in the monastery.

"You can all leave this monastery now if you want."

This woman was the most hellish of all the demons in this insane monastery. Her red hair was darker than blood, and her eyes blacker than night. Momo and the other children froze in shock at her declaration.

"The kids who leave get done away with." This was the all too plausible rumor that had spread in the monastery. A powerful fear that they were about to be killed ran through the crowd of children.

"We won't kill you or anything. I'm just saying that if you want to leave, we can transfer you to a normal monastery."

That was highly unexpected.

Why? The question was written on everyone's faces.

No one had ever informed them what exactly the monastery was training them for. But it was obvious they weren't being raised to be decent members of society.

As a murmur ran through the crowd, Momo was the only one to notice.

There was one lone girl standing behind the Master.

An awkward girl with long, pale-chestnut hair.

"You can live a normal life. It's not like you really know anything, anyway. If you lot are saved, this one's burden becomes even heavier."

The red-haired Master put a hand on the girl's head, tilted back her chin, and let out a nasty guffaw.

By the end of the day, 60 percent of the kids had requested a transfer. The newer the arrival, the more likely they were to transfer. Most of the ones who decided to stay were obviously beyond help at this point.

Though the children seemed happy to be set free, not one of them said a word of thanks to the young girl who seemed to be the reason for their salvation. If anything, Momo heard more children speaking poorly of her behind her back.

She's crazy, just like the Master. Creepy. What's she planning? Trying to make us feel like we owe her?

Momo knocked out every last child who spoke ill of the girl, then requested a transfer.

Finally, her life could go back to normal.

Gathering what little belongings she had, Momo noticed her handmade ribbon.

I'll give this to her before I go. It's normal to give someone a parting gift.

So for the first time, Momo approached the chestnut-haired girl.

"Hmm? What is it? You've never been the one to come up to me before."

By now, the once-expressionless girl had started to act relatively normal.

But it wasn't her growth as a human—it was the work of the Master, like someone grafting new parts onto a nearly broken toy to make it seem more whole.

The girl was still abnormal, to an almost repulsive degree.

But Momo didn't mind.

As the girl tilted her head, Momo showed her the scarf ribbon, then started carefully brushing back her hair.

"Here. Now you're stylish."

Taming the girl's lengthy auburn mane, Momo used her handmade ribbon to tie it up in a ponytail.

"You're...cute."

Momo was just trying to pay her back. And to say good-bye.

She could finally go back to the normal life she yearned for. She could live among normal people.

So she would probably never see this abnormal girl again.

"...Hee-hee. Thank you."

In that moment, Momo saw the girl smile for the first time.

She turned to face Momo with her new ponytail swaying gently, and she grinned as guilelessly as if it were the first time she had ever done so.

"That makes me so happy. Really."

That smile was brighter than the glow of a newly born star.

It was so clear, so beautiful, so brilliant—such a *normal* smile, from the pure heart of an innocent girl, in spite of the terrible place they were in.

Tears welled up in Momo's eyes.

Oh no. I can't.

Suddenly, she couldn't stop her tears.

Unlike the half-hearted ones she forced out when she felt she ought to cry, these were warm and infinite, and she couldn't hold them back even if she tried. Momo cried every single day, and yet this felt like the first time she had cried in years.

The sight of the girl's glowing smile had made her finally realize something.

Her normal self had vanished long ago. Momo hadn't even noticed until she saw that smile.

Realizing what she was lacking, she cried real tears for the first time in a very long time.

"Oh dear." The girl smiled gently and patted Momo's head. *"You really are a crybaby, aren't you?"*

Momo would never forget the kindness in her voice or the softness of her fingertips as she wiped away the tears.

It was love.

She loved this girl, who always comforted her when she cried. She loved the way the girl clumsily patted her head. She loved her so much that she didn't even care anymore about losing her normalcy.

"I'm going to become a villain, but you just live a normal life, okay?"

"No, I won't."

It was then that Momo realized she didn't even know the girl's name, nor had she ever mentioned her own.

But she couldn't bring herself to admit that now.

Thus, Momo called the girl "darling," and she started occasionally referring to herself in the third person.

And since she loved it when the girl patted her head, she started talking to her in a sweet, imploring tone.

"Momo's staying riiight here."

She knew now that she could never go back to normal.

And meeting this girl was far more valuable than "normal," anyway.

In that moment, Momo made up her mind.

Menou had chosen to kill people for the sake of an unspecified number of others.

In that case...

“Momo will kill people for you, darling.”

As she returned to reality, she murmured the vow that she had silently taken all those years ago.

Momo was willing to kill whomever she needed to.

She hated this world so much that she was sure it wasn't worth protecting, hated the blissful ignorance of the people living normally in it so much that she could gag, and hated selfish people who devoted themselves to combat so much that she could vomit. Every last one of them might as well die, she thought from the bottom of her heart.

That was why she was willing to do whatever it took for Menou, the one person in this world whom she truly loved.

While she was reminiscing, her information had finished transmitting.

Momo closed her scripture and mentally ran through what she had to do on this train.

“Yes, this'll be easy. Just another day of doing my best so darling will pat my heehead.”

Nodding firmly to herself, she imagined the future and felt a surge of motivation.

First, the engine room.

As far as Momo was concerned, everyone in that first-class carriage might as well die, so she had no motivation to save them. On the other hand, if there was trouble in the engine room, the entire train could be in danger. Best to secure that area first.

Momo leaned out the window, the wind whipping back her pigtails.

She checked the knots in her ribbons to make sure they wouldn't come loose,

then reached up to the roof.

After that fateful day so long ago, Momo went behind the Master's back to investigate Menou's history and learn where she came from.

The sole survivor of a town that was obliterated into whiteness.

Menou's town turned white and vanished because of an Otherworlder's Pure Concept gone out of control, and while Menou somehow survived, her memories, soul, and spirit were all wiped clean.

Since she had lost all trace of her original personality, Menou was very easily influenced by others. She absorbed all of the Master's teachings without fail and had a tendency to be deeply affected by the emotions of those around her.

That's why that girl is so dangerous.

Momo narrowed her eyes as the face of the black-haired, dark-eyed Otherworlder flashed across her mind.

Menou's heart and soul were too pure to be in contact with a target for a long time, instead of killing them quickly.

Momo could easily paste on an innocent smile regardless of her innermost thoughts, but Menou would inevitably develop fondness for the target just by spending time with them. Especially when their time together was this long.

If they grew closer, she might end up feeling so conflicted that she might not be able to kill the target at all.

Combined with the guilt Menou felt toward those she had already killed, it might just break her heart.

Master would probably laugh that this was just another form of training.

But Momo would never allow it.

"I won't let that happen. No matter what."

She couldn't let anything happen that would mar the smile she fell in love with.

This mission would probably be fine. With the help of the archbishop in Garm, they had a plan to kill Akari, whose Pure Concept of *Time* otherwise prevented

her from dying.

But if a target ever appeared someday that Menou couldn't kill, well, Momo was there to take on that burden so Menou wouldn't have to cry.

When Momo learned about Menou's past, she immediately enrolled in and completed the Executioner training course.

Her faith in the Lord proved to be the lowest of any ever recorded in the history of the course, but she made up for that with her incredibly high results in every other regard. Momo spared no effort to complete the course—in order to be reunited with Menou as soon as possible, as the latter had already completed her training. Her hard work was ultimately rewarded, and she was assigned as Menou's assistant.

Ever since then, everything Momo did was for Menou's sake.

Momo launched herself out of the window and landed on top of the train.

There were eleven terrorists left still occupying the train. She started toward the engine room to take care of three of them, but then froze.

"Oh-ho? What an unexpectedly adorable visitor."

Someone else was on top of the train, addressing her.

A lookout for the terrorists? Momo was on guard immediately as her eyes fell on an intimidating lady in a dramatic dress.

"Hello there. I am Ashuna Grisarika, princess of the Noblesse and a proper member of the knighthood."

Even as she stood atop the train, the woman's menacing presence wasn't hindered in the least by the wind whipping through her glamorous blonde hair and skimpy dress. The Guiding Light emitting from the train's engine room even looked like a glowing halo behind her.

Carrying herself with pride as she introduced herself, the young woman smiled fearlessly.

"Now, who might you be?"

Holding the sword that had cut down the terrorists surrounding her, the

Princess Knight's grin widened.

The view below them rushed by dizzyingly.

As the vibrations from the rail shook her body in time with the moving train, Momo narrowed her eyes.

The smell of blood filled her nose.



It was coming from upwind—from the sword of this woman, Ashuna Grisarika.

“A priestess in white, eh? Those yellow lines must mean you’re independent, but that skirt length is quite innovative. I’ve never seen one above the knee... Not bad.”

Ashuna nodded at Momo’s clothes with great interest.

The color of a priestess’s clothes, especially the symbol on the chest and the color of the fabric, showed their rank in the Faust. A black habit indicated a nun, considered below the rank of the First Estate; white clothes like Momo’s implied a novice who only recently took up the cloth. Only when one donned the navy robes Menou wore was one considered an official priestess by the rest of the world.

And the yellow symbol on Momo’s robes meant that she didn’t belong to any specific parish. Somehow, Ashuna seemed to know quite a bit about the iconography of priestesses.

“Quite bold of an unaligned priestess to alter her uniform, but I do like your style. You’ve concentrated all the frills in one place to make them lighter. After all, the human body is beautiful enough on its own. Clothing ought to highlight the curves of the wearer, not disguise them. Don’t you agree?”

It was small wonder she would say something like that, given her own attire. The woman’s clothing exposed a scandalous amount of skin. While the filmy skirt looked easy to move in, the diamond shapes of the upper half of her outfit covered little more than her chest and her belly button.

Combined with her own inherent beauty, Ashuna cut an elegant figure, but that wasn’t all. In her hand, she clasped a sword engraved with a crest. The delicate engraving was so lovely that it could be mistaken for a ceremonial weapon, but this was no mere decoration. It was a formidable weapon with the ability to invoke multiple seals.

Momo put on a friendly smile.

“So you are the Princess Knight Ashuna? It’s an honor, Your Highness.”

“Oh-ho? You know of me, do you?”

“Of course. Your Highness’s fame precedes you. I am Momo, a priestess.”

Ashuna was fairly well known: Though she was a princess born into a Noblesse family, she joined the Order of Knights, the nation’s law enforcement organization, to take the safety of her land into her own hands.

“As you can see, I’m a white-robed priestess, as yet a novice. I was on my way to the ancient capital Garm as part of a pilgrimage, but then the train was attacked by terrorists. So, er...could you perhaps lower your sword?”

“Hmm? Ah yes.”

Momo attempted to show her that she wasn’t a threat, which seemed to lower Ashuna’s guard at least a little. The princess returned her sword to its sheath and approached her with a friendly expression.

“It seemed as if those terrorists were after me, but it looks like they went to the rear cars, too.”

“Yes, about five of them. I’ve knocked them out already.”

“I see. Beg pardon for the trouble. I’ve finished off the knaves who came into the royal carriage and the engine room,” Ashuna assured.

“How impressive. You certainly live up to your reputation!”

As Ashuna strode along the top of the train, she didn’t show a shred of fear.

Her level of calm was remarkable, considering the whipping winds and the unsteady footing beneath them. Her posture made evident her well-tempered muscles and the depth of her confidence and courage.

“I was quite surprised to find you up here with your sword drawn, though, Your Highness.”

“Yes, well, I was planning to go and cut down the terrorists in the rear cars, too. Besides, I was a bit taken aback, since you’re dressed like that.”

Momo smiled sheepishly, and Ashuna continued with a calm countenance, as if making casual conversation over tea.

“My father is currently on trial for heresy, albeit due to deeds that were

outside my knowledge. Forgive me if I hold some mixed feelings toward the Faust at present.”

“Ah yes, I’ve heard. But the trial has only just begun, correct? His Majesty has yet to be found guilty.”

As they chatted, Ashuna casually walked closer to Momo.

Then, suddenly, her chest glowed.

It was the light emitted by Enhancement, but it was blindingly bright. At the same time as the dazzling distraction, the sword flashed out of its sheath and toward Momo’s neck.

“Oh?”

Ashuna raised an eyebrow bemusedly, surrounded by powerful Guiding Light.

“This is a surprise.”

“What...was that foor?!” Momo’s face froze, but she didn’t lose her smile.

She was gripping her coping saw in both hands, blocking Ashuna’s sword from reaching her. The thin saw bent slightly where it met the blade of the sword, but it still held up to the strain. Momo wore white gloves for just such an occasion, to protect her hands when she needed to grip her saw.

“Oh, you know. Like I said, I have mixed feelings toward the Faust at the moment.”

“So you thought since one such member of the Faust had shown up, you might as well dispose of her nooow?”

“Heavens, of course not.”

Momo drew out her syllables, not to sound sweet like usual but to provoke her opponent. Ashuna seemed unfazed by Momo’s mocking tone, and she simply put more of her weight into her sword.

“I stopped short, you know. If I had really swung with the intention of taking off your head, a flimsy saw wouldn’t have been able to stop me, even if the metal is enhanced with Guiding Force.”

Ashuna sounded quite confident that if she had been serious, Momo would

already be dead.

Slowly, Momo's smile curled downward.

"That's quite the ego you've got there. You really are as untamable as they saay."

"I do not underestimate my own strength. That's all. With the crested sword of the royals in my capable hands, there is little that I cannot cut, but... I suppose I must applaud you for reacting so quickly. Quite impressive."

Again, Momo's taunting did nothing to dampen Ashuna's fearless grin.

Ashuna's sword was slowly pressing harder against the saw. Momo could tell one thing from the strength with which the blade bore down on hers: This woman produced an unbelievable amount of power.

She must be incredibly well-trained. The Princess Knight was likely just as strong as any chosen and carefully forged Executioner—perhaps even stronger.

Prodigies came in all forms, in any land and from any estate. Without a doubt, Ashuna was naturally gifted with an incredible level of energy control.

"As I said before, my father is on trial for the sin of heresy. He stands accused of Otherworlder summoning, yet there is not an Otherworlder to be found anywhere in the castle.

"Ohhh. Is that sooo?"

"Indeed. That is how they are responding to the trial at present. 'If we truly summoned Otherworlders, then where are they?'"

"Castles are veeery big. Are you sure they aren't just hiiiiding them? Although, I agree it might not be truuue. In which case, he'll be acquitted. Isn't that niiice?"

"Is it, though? For I do not think either is the case. My father certainly did call on Otherworlders, but they are no longer in his care. That is what I think. You know what that would mean, do you not?"

"Not reeeeeally? Enlighten me, Princess-poo."

"The Otherworlders were killed before the trial began."

Ashuna pressed harder with her sword. She still seemed to have plenty of power left. Momo was nowhere near her limit, either—she raised her own Enhancement to fend off the princess.

Crunch. The metal beneath their feet caved a little.

“You must know of the Faust’s so-called Executioners?”

“Ahhh, that silly old rumor? I’ve heard of it, yeees. Aaand? What about iiit?”

“Well, when I laid eyes on you, a thought crossed my mind. If that Executioner finished their job and left the royal capital just as the Holy Inquisition was beginning—why, they might just be on this very train.”



“That’s a little too convenient, don’t you thiiink? Better not let your imagination get the best of you.”

“I wonder. I did get on this train with the same timing, after all. Besides...”

Ashuna’s eyes glittered with delight.

“I have utter faith in the strength I’ve built all my life...and I’ve never once doubted my gut.”

Guiding Force: Connect—

Part of the design on the sword glowed.

Momo’s eyes widened as she sensed the conjuring of a crest starting up close by.

Royal Sword, Crest—

It activated, causing fire to burst forth from the blade, heat licking Momo’s cheek.

It was an attack conjuring at point-blank range. But Momo couldn’t dodge. The activated crest was on the very sword that she was holding off with her coping saw. If she let up even slightly, the blade would likely come straight for her neck.

Defensive conjuring with my scripture, then—no, I won’t finish it in time. The conjuring in scriptures was powerful but complicated. Momo couldn’t manipulate Guiding Force nearly as precisely as Menou, so her speed wouldn’t be enough to outpace the crest.

Making a split-second decision, Momo charged the seal on the inside of her robes instead.

Guiding Force: Connect—Priestess Robes, Crest—

Ashuna’s conjuring was about to strike.

It was shifting from the preparatory stage to invocation. The energy of the flames rising from the sword was suddenly sucked inward.

Invoke [Flameburst]

The flames around the sword exploded outward.

And at the same time—

Invoke [Barrier]

Sonic waves shook the air next to Momo's ears. The violent explosion of energy drove toward her, but just in time, she was able to focus the defensive barrier near her head and defend herself from the blast.

If she let the shock waves knock her aside, she would be thrown from the train. Momo used the wind blowing toward them to her advantage and jumped back, putting distance between them.

"A defense crest in your robes, eh? Heavens, but the technology of the Faust never fails to impress. So advanced in materials science and crest design. I couldn't even tell what sort of crest it was."

Ashuna gracefully shouldered her broadsword and looked at Momo appraisingly. Her attitude as she spoke words of admiration was as haughty as ever.

"And that was an excellent split-second judgment to protect your head first, if I may say so. You priestesses are all strong, I'll give you that...though it seems very strange for a mere white-robe to react so quickly. I suspect you aren't being wholly truthful by introducing yourself as a novice."

"Oh? Whatever do you meeean? It's common sense to protect one's head, nooo?"

Momo tittered dismissively at her opponent's words.

As she did so, she touched a hand to the ribbons that secured her pigtails, ensuring that her most prized possessions hadn't been lost. Then she directed a bright smile at Ashuna.

"Can't have my ribbons getting singed, you knooow?"

Thank goodness.

If her ribbons had been damaged, Momo wasn't sure she could have stopped herself from killing this woman.

“Fashion is very important for girls. It’s perfectly normal to protect thaaat.”

“Ha. We are alike indeed. I enjoy dressing up as well. Perhaps we could get along after all.”

“Could you not compare my sense of style to yooours?”

Momo wouldn’t stand for this rich woman to compare her little dress-up hobby to the accessories that she’d received from the most precious person to her in all the world. Still smiling, she vented her anger verbally instead.

“In fact, aren’t you just about the same age as meee? You’re a little too strong to be a princess, nooo? How creepy. Your strength must be a turnoff to others, you knooow.”

“Heh, you’re too kind. My strength is the result of my dedication—and entirely my choice, I’ll have you know.”

Ashuna responded plainly, flexing as if to show off her muscles.

“Beauty and strength are what I like best. Every society is enamored with the beautiful. And strength is beautiful no matter the time or place. That’s why I became strong, and why I am keenly interested in the strength of others. I’m quite taken with your power as well.”

“Oh, reeeally? I couldn’t care leeess.”

Momo scowled. Ashuna’s aesthetic preferences meant nothing to her.

After she’d provoked Momo this much and even attacked her, Momo had no intention of letting her off easily.

She couldn’t have figured out that Momo was an Executioner’s assistant just from a little bit of fighting. But Momo had to keep this sharp-eyed girl from setting her sights on Menou.

“Come now, do not be cold. Besides, I wish to ask you something in regards to the incident in the royal capital that led to my father’s trial. As a related party, I’d be thrilled if you would answer me, Momo.”

“Oh, shut up...! I tooold you, it’s nothing to do with meee!”

Ashuna calling her casually by name was the last straw. Dragging out her

words with increased irritation, Momo charged her coping saw with energy.

Guiding Force: Connect—Coping Saw, Crest—Double Invoke [Anchor, Oscillation]

There were two crests carved into the saw. According to the laws of materialogy, that was the limit for this weapon.

By activating both at once, Momo could set the saw to stay in a straight line and make it start oscillating like a chain saw.

“Now, let’s get back to it, shall weee?”

Momo loosely lowered her arm, pointing the blade toward the ground. The tip of the saw made contact with the roof of the train beneath her feet.

With a shrill screech, the metal of the roof began to peel off where it touched the saw.

“I wonder how long your fancy royal toooy can hold up to my little wiiire.”

Speaking over the grating sound of metal on metal, Momo smiled slyly.

“Let’s put it to the test, shall weeee?”

The sound of clashing metal came from above Menou’s head.

When she made her way past the dining car and into the nobles’ carriage, she heard violent footsteps directly overhead. The obvious clamor of battle consisted of more than the ordinary clang of sword against sword.

Instead, there was a grating noise of metal being scraped away. And shortly thereafter, an explosion. Then the fearless laughter of someone obviously enjoying themselves, countered by a syrupy voice slinging insults.

These sounds, which no mere sword duel could explain, carried on for a while with no signs of stopping.

“Honestly...”

Menou could only sigh at the fact that Momo was clearly fighting a needless battle.

She had heard most of their last exchange from below. Most likely, Momo had deliberately amped up the volume of the conversation so Menou could

catch it.

It was none other than the Princess Knight Ashuna who was clashing with Menou's dependable assistant. She was the youngest daughter of the Grisarika family, as well as a roaming knight. Since she attempted to improve the state of society wherever she went, she was popular among the people of the Commons.

There was no reason for them to fight this person. Even if she did have her eye on them, they were better off jumping from the train than engaging in battle with her for no reason. Surely with Momo's Enhancement, she could have leaped from the moving train and landed without a scratch.

It would have been easy enough to escape and lure her away, then, but instead Momo was fighting her. She always had been quick to resort to violence.

"Well, at least she's restraining herself, I suppose."

From the sound of things, Momo was certainly worked up, but she wasn't flying off the handle. If she had completely lost control, Menou doubted she would hear the sounds of Momo's coping saw.

While Momo was keeping the Princess Knight occupied, Menou passed through the first-class section of the train.

She checked the rooms as she went, but there didn't seem to be any problems in the nobles' carriages.

Ashuna had certainly cut down the terrorists there, but it looked like she hadn't taken their lives. Most of them were simply tied up and unconscious, while a few lay groaning and half-awake. She had severed the tendons of many of their limbs—mercilessly, yet precisely and effectively.

Judging by the aftermath, Menou guessed the engine room was probably taken care of as well.

The train would soon reach its next stop. Most likely, Ashuna would get off there to turn in the terrorists. Menou just had to be careful to keep the clever princess from seeing her or Akari, since she seemed to have sharp intuition.

She wasn't worried about Momo losing, of course.

Perhaps Ashuna was a prodigy among knights, but Momo was a genius among Executioners.

She was so naturally talented that the Master who supervised their monastery had said, "There's nothing I can teach her." Deciding that she could safely entrust Ashuna to Momo, Menou headed for the engine room. The power source and steering system were there, so she thought it best to make sure everything was safe.

"Oh, a priestess?"

The engineers' tense expressions relaxed when they saw Menou's priestess robes.

Terrorists had just hijacked the train. It was natural the staff would be nervous about outsiders entering the room, but most people trusted priestesses implicitly.

Menou smiled gently to further calm the men's nerves.

"Yes, I just happened to be on the train when this happened. Is everything all right here?"

"Yeah, the Princess Knight herself took care of things. For such a gorgeous lady, she's really strong!"

"Yeah, that's our princess for ya. She brought 'em all down in no time flat. You heard of her, Priestess? Her Highness Ashuna is famous for traveling around to reform the world!"

"Yes, I know of her. I'm a little disappointed that I missed the chance to meet her myself."

The men seemed quite proud of their princess as they bragged about her exploits.

Menou responded politely as she looked over the captured terrorists. All three of them had been tied up together. The smell of the blood was likely because the tendons in their limbs had been cut, just like the men in the first-class car.

As she expected, there were no problems here. Most likely, Momo would wrap up her battle with Ashuna before they stopped at the next station. Once Menou finished talking with the engineers, she thought, she could go back to the rear cars and assure Akari that everything was fine.

And then she sensed conjuring in the air.

“Yeah, I wish you could’ve seen the princess fight, Prieste—Huh? Something the matter?”

“Not at all...”

Menou looked more closely at one of the tied-up terrorists. She had assumed all three of them were knocked out, but one of them must have been faking it.

A trace of red Guiding Light emitted from the man’s stomach.

“You there. You’re hiding something in your body, aren’t you?”

“Heh-heh... Busted, huh?”

One of the terrorists must have been a former adventurer with a basic grasp of conjuring. He’d swallowed some kind of Guiding vessel in advance, hiding it in his stomach.

And now he was about to try to activate it.

“But it’s too late now! If we don’t make it to Garm, we’re gonna get hanged anyway. Everyone on this train is goin’ straight to hell with us!”

“I won’t let— Hrmm?”

The phrasing of his threat made it seem likely that the vessel was for triggering some kind of explosive. Menou had been trying to determine the nature of the item in the man’s body since the moment she detected it, intending to suppress the explosion, but then her eyes widened.

“A Primary Red Stone?”

But that should be impossible.

Menou considered a Guiding vessel to be far more valuable than any gun. Naturally, it was a designated taboo and infinitely more difficult to acquire than the aforementioned weapons. Most of all, it required very high conjuring ability

to use properly.

And if it was placed inside a person and activated, the unfortunate human serving as its fuel would meet a nasty fate.

“Hunh? I dunno what it’s called, but... Heh-heh! Goin’ by your reaction, it must be somethin’ pretty special. I swallowed it just in case the— Abuhh?”

As the man boasted, his skin suddenly sloughed off and coursed into his open mouth.

He clearly had no idea what was happening. As the outer layer of his body forced its way down his throat and into his stomach, all he could do was look blankly at the newly exposed pink of his body. His eyes were full of pure confusion.

There was no time for Menou to stop it.

The man’s body crumpled in on itself in an instant.

“What the GUH—?”

After the skin came the flesh. The man’s body was being pulled into the Primary Red Stone in his stomach, one layer at a time.

The unnatural power within him tore his muscle fiber, bent his bones in grotesque directions, and sent his limbs flailing all over.

His human form was able to hold out for only a few short seconds.

Then a ghastly noise filled the room.

As the suction surpassed the limits of the human body, his flesh was compressed and his bones crushed. There must have been some kind of automatic starter implanted in him. The unconscious men who were tied up with him met the same fate. Before they could even manage a scream, their skin began to peel off and rush toward the same point.

Soon, the rope that had been holding the men flopped to the floor.

Unable to stomach the grotesque scene that had just unfolded before them, the engineers vomited out the window.

Even after the terrorists’ bodies were pressed into a ball of flesh, the bizarre

phenomenon showed no signs of slowing. The pulpy remains continued collapsing in on themselves to the point of liquefaction. But not a single drop of blood hit the floor—it was all sucked inward to what had once been human bodies. It had turned into an utterly unrecognizable mass.

Once the formerly solid remains were churned into a fluid, the necessary ingredients began separating themselves.

The writhing mass of liquid slowly rose and stripped away any unnecessary components. It was disposing of anything that wasn't the required color, in accordance with the vessel that had activated.

The leftovers of the once-human corpses fell to the floor with a *splat*.

What was left was a truly startling scene.

The primary color red had extracted itself from the rest of the body with startling vividness.

It wasn't just the man who had activated the vessel who met this fate. All three men were sucked into the Primary Red Stone and used as fuel for its activation. Most likely, all the other terrorists in the other cars had met the same fate.

Sure enough, more pure red began seeping in from the direction of the first-class carriage.

"Tch!"

If she crushed the Primary Red Stone now, everything red would begin functioning independently. In that case, the vessel's power would be divided, but the passengers near the independent blobs of red would almost certainly be devoured.

It might lessen the vessel's overall power, but if there were more individual components, it would be that much harder to deal with them all. Instead, she made the split-second decision that it was best to let all of it gather here in one place and deal with it in one fell swoop. Menou used the rest of the activation time to push the engineers out of the room.

"Get out of here! Quickly!"

“B-but we can’t leave the engine room...!”

The man was looking at the Guiding engine.

It was true that the train was still running—and about to reach a station, to boot. They couldn’t leave the engine room—and by extension, the controls and power source—unmanned.

However, this was no time to worry about that.

“It’s all right. If it comes to it, I’ll take control myself.”

“But you can’t just—”

“I can and I will!” Menou shouted at the man menacingly, then shifted to a polite smile. “Please trust me. I’m a clergywoman, an ally of the Commons, remember? Priestesses are pure, proper, and, of course, powerful.”

She spoke as reassuringly and persuasively as possible, keeping her tone bright. The men looked at one another, nodded, and scrambled out of the room.

After watching them go, Menou turned back toward her opponent.

Approximately sixteen blobs of red were converging, merging into one greater whole. Once it had extracted the red from the sixteen bodies, the combined Guiding Forces activated the taboo vessel, the Primary Red Stone.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Red Stone, Inner Seal Conjuration—Invoke [Primary Red, Armored Knight]

Red, in this case extracted from human materials, was one of the core colors that painted the world. Now the mass of pure redness created a single conjured soldier. As it turned its sword toward Menou, it was reminiscent of a knight from a fairy tale: a sword, a shield, and nary a gap in its full plate armor. Every component of the new foe was pure, dark red.

“So it’s manifesting as a knight? Well, I suppose that’s better than an angel or a dragon.”

Menou drew her dagger from the sheath on her thigh, crouching in a battle-ready stance.

It was about what she expected from the materials of sixteen people, but it was certainly not an enemy to be taken lightly. This conjured soldier still had at least sixteen men's worth of strength.

The red conjured soldier swung its sword.

"Ngh...!"

Menou parried the first strike with her dagger, grunting with the effort.

It was heavy.

She grimaced under the weight of the blow, which would have sent her flying if she'd taken a direct hit, but still managed to knock her opponent's sword aside. The red conjured soldier's physical strength was far higher than Menou's, even with Enhancement. However, its skills left quite a bit to be desired. Still, in this cramped space, even blindly rampaging with brute strength was a threat in itself.

Each time the conjured soldier moved, it expended Guiding Force and slowed down accordingly. Normally, the best approach would be to surround it in a group and chip away at it, or to engage from a distance until it wore itself out.

A strong opponent, to be sure. Any normal priestesses would probably need a group of at least five to take it down.

But Menou, who had already gauged the conjured soldier's abilities in an instant, simply spoke with confidence.

"Not a problem."

The Primary Red Stone had frightening capacity for conjuring, but this artificial soldier wasn't using that potential to the fullest.

Conjured soldiers created from a Primary Color came in a wide variety of strengths. The strongest of them would probably require the strength of an entire nation to bring it down, but this one was of much poorer quality. Most likely, the main goal of the weapon was not to create the soldier but to silence the terrorists from spilling confidential information.

Menou calmly continued to dodge the artless strikes of the soldier's sword.

At this rate, she could probably wear it down in close combat. Other than

that, all she had to worry about was making sure none of the engine room's equipment got damaged in the fight. Menou had just settled on a strategy of buying time until the knight wore itself out when something happened.

An object fluttered in through the window.

It was Momo's coping saw, flying into the window from where she and Ashuna were fighting on top of the train car.

The coping saw was light. Perhaps Ashuna had knocked it out of her hands, or perhaps Momo had flung it. Either way, it must have left her grasp and been carried in here by the wind.

If this were an ordinary saw, its appearance would have been harmless.

The problem was that *Anchor* and *Oscillate* were still active.

"Ah!"

She tried to knock it out of the car, but the conjured soldier managed to choose that exact moment to swing its sword at her. Menou was forced to jump back, and the coping saw landed on the engine room floor.

As soon as the rapidly oscillating saw hit the floor, it launched itself around the engine room.

"Tch!"

Menou clicked her tongue, using her dagger to repel the saw as it flew toward her.

The saw bounded around erratically, and while it hit the conjured soldier from time to time, it barely left a scratch. Menou, however, definitely preferred not to be hit by the whizzing blade if at all possible.

She assessed the Guiding Force remaining in the bouncing saw and quickly did some calculations.

About thirty seconds. In that short amount of time, *Anchor* and *Oscillation* on the saw should wear off.

The situation had taken a turn for the worse. Still, it wasn't bad enough to put Menou in a state of despair.

She continued to fight the red conjured soldier, never taking her attention off the saw.

Just as she blocked a frontal attack from the conjured soldier's sword, the coping saw—which tore up pieces of the floor and ceiling each time it made contact—flew toward her from behind.

Cursing her bad luck, Menou charged the seal sewn inside her priestess's robes with energy.

Guiding Force: Connect—Priestess Robes, Crest—Invoke [Barrier]

The coping saw bounced off the defensive barrier that formed at her back. It flew toward the ceiling, still not slowing down. This time, the saw hit the conjured soldier's head and bounced toward Menou from the front.

The saw should run out of Guiding Force any second now, she thought, dodging it.

But then the conjured soldier swung its sword in an unnecessarily dramatic follow-up attack.

As she traced its trajectory, she realized her mistake.

Menou herself wasn't in danger. It would be simple to dodge the conjured soldier's latest wild swing.

But the engine's brake valve was right in the red sword's path.

"Sh—"

Menou tried to rush forward, but she couldn't stop it. The knight was physically stronger than her. Unless her stance was perfect, there was no way she could block the blow.

The red sword mowed straight through the brake valve of the engine room.

"You damned stupid puppet!"

Menou hurled verbal abuse at the conjured soldier without thinking.

With the engine room's brake valve broken, the train had lost the ability to safely stop. Menou had been fighting carefully to avoid damaging the engine, but the coping saw had momentarily distracted her. And the exaggerated size of

the conjured soldier's swings had thrown off her calculations—no, she couldn't make excuses. This was a massive failure on her part.

Clank. Too late, the coping saw finally ran out of Guiding Force and dropped to the floor.

"Ah, dammit...!"

Swallowing her frustration, Menou forced herself to think. Complaining wouldn't fix anything. Her mental priorities shifted from the conjured soldier to the safety of the train itself, casting about for a solution.

A train that couldn't decelerate was in a horrible predicament.

If it kept moving without slowing down, at best, it would eventually derail itself while rounding a curve too quickly, and at worst, it could even catch up with another train and crash. Either way, the passengers wouldn't come out of either situation unharmed.

But it wasn't too late.

First, she had to call Momo. No, at this point, they should really ask for Ashuna's help. She no longer had the luxury of trying to hide her identity. With three skilled people, there would be plenty of options for stopping the train.

Menou continued fighting the conjured soldier as she thought up a plan, when suddenly—

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ashuna fall off the train and Momo jumping after her.

"Why...?!"

Why now of all times? Menou thought at first, but it was quite the opposite.

It had happened *because* Menou was fighting in the engine room. Momo must have noticed her presence and quickly kicked Ashuna off the train before the fight in the engine room could draw the princess's attention.

It wasn't a bad call on Momo's part; indeed, Menou hadn't wanted to meet Ashuna face-to-face, either. And there was no way Momo could have known that the train's brake system was broken.

It might have been possible with both Momo's and Ashuna's help, but there was no way Menou could stop the train on her own.

She simply didn't have enough Guiding Force. Menou's internal supply was higher than average but not nearly as high as Momo's or Ashuna's.

Ask the engineers for help, then? No, they wouldn't be of any use.

Or was it possible to repair the brake valve? No, not enough time. What else could she do? How could she stop the train without conjuring? Could she at least get the passengers off safely?

Analyzing each of the possibilities and ruling them out in turn, Menou was forced to reach a terrible conclusion.

It was impossible. She couldn't stop the train. Short of a miracle occurring, the train was going to crash, and people would die.

The smile of the little girl they'd comforted back on the platform flashed across her mind.

Was that girl whom Akari healed still somewhere on this train, too?

"....."

Menou was gritting her teeth in frustration at her own powerlessness.

CLACK. There was a sound that somehow didn't shake the air.

The sound of the world going offtrack.

"Ha-ha-ha! You're not half-bad, Momo!"

Momo scowled at the surprised laughter that greeted her when she landed after leaping from the train.

She had sacrificed a coping saw to distract Ashuna long enough to kick her off, but Ashuna seemed to be in perfect condition. Even her clothes, while a bit dirtied, didn't show a single tear. The Princess Knight was chuckling, still in a battle-ready stance.

"You're unharmed after falling off a traaain? How very straaange... If only you had died."

"Heh-heh. It will take more than a little fall to best the results of my training.

The same goes for you, eh, Momo? Very impressive.”

“Don’t compare me to yooou, Princess-poo. It makes me feel so awful about myself. You’re so creepy that I’m starting to feel sick. May I leave nooow?”

There were a few nicks on Ashuna’s royal sword but certainly no major damage. Momo produced her second saw from within her miniskirt.

Suddenly, both young women shifted their attention from each other to the area around them.

“What was thaaat...?”

“...How strange.”

They were both assailed by such a powerful compulsion that it seemed more important to find the source than to continue fighting. They froze in place at the same time, then noticed that the other was experiencing the same odd sensation.

What they had felt was a bizarre shift in the senses, as if their innards had briefly floated upward.

It was like all of the space around them had lifted and then fallen exactly back into place. In that moment before everything settled where it belonged, the shift seemed to jolt their very minds. It was a bizarrely impossible sensation, difficult to describe more precisely than that. And yet, nothing in the world seemed to have changed in any obvious way.

Even the two women who had been smiling all through their mortal combat were slightly shaken.

They both murmured the same words at once.

“That was...creepy.”

The train continued down the tracks, getting farther and farther away from the pair who had paused their battle. The Guiding Light emitting from the engine sent sparks through the air.

Neither Momo nor Ashuna noticed that the traces of light it left behind were mingled with a glow slightly different from that of the train’s engine.

Menou felt the same discomfiting sensation as the pair who were no longer on the train.

“What was that...?”

She furrowed her brow even as she continued to parry the conjured soldier’s sword.

It felt as disquieting as if she had seen a normally functioning clock suddenly start to tick backward all on its own. And even if one dismantled the clock and inspected each part, there would be nothing out of order, no cause to be found. Eventually, one would assume that the feeling was simply a trick of the imagination and forget all about it.

That was what the shift felt like.

But in this case, Menou didn’t need to go looking for the cause.

“Menou!”

“Huh?”

Still feeling uneasy, Menou kept fighting the knight when she heard a voice behind her.

A lone girl was running up to her from the neighboring train car.

“Akari?! Why?!”

The black-haired girl sprinting closer, her chest heaving, was unmistakably Akari. She seemed out of breath, having apparently run all the way here from the rear cars.

Menou froze for a moment in surprise.

The conjured soldier took that moment to strike. Instead of Menou, it aimed its sword at the seemingly defenseless Akari.

“Wah?!”

“Watch out!”

Menou just barely blocked the slash of the red sword.

She jumped in front of Akari at the last second to protect her. Parrying the

opponent's powerful blow, she charged one of the crests on her dagger with power.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Gale]

A gust of wind burst out of the dagger and buffeted the conjured soldier, knocking it back against the wall of the car.

Moments later, however, the knight stood back up as if it hadn't been hurt at all. Indeed, it had taken very little damage; a conjured soldier would immediately regenerate unless its core was broken.

"Th-thank you, Menou. I'm happy you protected me. You're so strong! But what is that red person?!"

"Forget about that! Why did you come here?! Tell me! Why?!"

Menou had no time for Akari's silly question. Without thinking, she shouted at her angrily.

Frankly, the presence of someone with no combat abilities, like Akari, was nothing more than a hindrance. It wasn't really a problem if she witnessed the battle, but having to protect her would slow Menou.

"I—I mean, like, the guys who were tied up suddenly got all squashed, and some slimy red stuff headed for the front of the train...!"

"Is that any reason to go chasing after it?!"

The sight of human bodies turning into red materials was certainly unusual, but it was a gutsy move to see that and decide to follow the red blob.

"I told you to behave yourself and wait, didn't I?! Weren't you listening? Or are you a bad girl, huh?!"

"Um, neither?! I'm a good girl who was worried about you, that's all! If anything, shouldn't you be impressed?!"

"Don't be absurd!"

This one's cheekier than I expected, Menou thought, her frustration building.

Things couldn't be worse.

The soldier in front of them had absorbed materials from human bodies,

using the accumulated power to go on a rampage. And it even had the ability to replace the energy it spent from its surroundings. The red from human bodies was one thing, but if it absorbed the Guiding Force from a Pure Concept, like from Akari, there was no telling what might occur.

If Menou was lucky, Akari's ability might malfunction. In the best-case scenario, perhaps she wouldn't be able to revive anymore. That would make Menou's job simple.

But if she was unlucky, they would have to deal with a conjured killing machine imbued with the Pure Concept of *Time*.

"Aaargh! Seriously, why did you have to come here?!"

"I-I'm sorry! Don't cry, Menou!"

"Oh, be quiet!"

The situation was getting so out of hand that tears welled up in Menou's eyes, but she didn't want to be comforted by the source of her problems. As she desperately tried to come up with a solution for the latest disaster, the conjured soldier kept attacking. Akari shrieked behind her. She had no way of stopping the train. The combination of the obvious threat and the absurdly optimistic girl proved to be too much.

Something inside Menou snapped.

"Enough already! Take this!"

In a fit of frustration, Menou flung her dagger at the conjured soldier.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Double Invoke [Guiding Thread, Gale]

Just as the dagger left her hand, she activated both of its crests. Thread formed around the dagger's pommel, connecting it to Menou's hand. At the same time, the force of the wind produced by the other crest sped up the blade, propelling it into and through the conjured soldier's armor.

Now she had the route she needed.

It wasn't the ideal method, but Akari's sudden appearance meant that Menou could no longer afford to take her time. Menou sent her own power flowing

down the thread that stretched from her dagger to her hand.

Guiding Force: Connect (via Guiding Thread)—Primary Red Stone, Armored Knight—Outside Invasion

Menou's power flowed through the dagger, piercing the conjured soldier, forcing its way inside. The conjured soldier's movements froze for just a moment.

But then powerful resistance sent the energy back toward her.

The soulless device had been equipped with a defensive mechanism to retaliate against the attempted intrusion. Now it was using it to deflect Menou's Guiding Force.

She had expected some resistance, of course. If she had backup, she could have relied on them to crush the core while the conjured soldier was frozen for a moment, but of course she couldn't ask Akari to do that. Instead, she continued to push Guiding Force against the conjured soldier while also charging her scripture.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 10:9—Invoke [For so long as one desires good fortune, another shall inherit thy misfortune.]

The double activation of the crests and the conjuring from the scripture combined to alter the mechanisms inside the conjured soldier.

It was a highly advanced technique, using three completely different kinds of conjuring at once. But even Menou, who boasted exceptional control over her powers, couldn't keep it up easily.

Menou's face was twisted in pain. Her brain was operating at maximum capacity, churning so quickly that it felt like her nerves might catch fire. Sweat poured forth from all over her body under the strain of drawing out and manipulating so much power. This sort of feat wasn't the kind that could be sustained for long. If she kept it up, her soul and spirit would be drained dry.

Even so, Menou gritted her teeth and pressed on with laser focus.

"Huff... Nnnngh!"

Her brain tissue felt like it was burning up.

She was clashing against the torrent of power that the conjured soldier was sending back toward her. It was trying to break through the wall of friction where it met Menou's own power. If her scripture, which was forming a protective barrier, were to fail, then the energy would flood into Menou's body and spirit and likely destroy her.

But before that could happen, it was over.

Conjuration Alteration—Order [Self-Destruct]

Her order went through.

"Yesss!"

The violently resisting conjured soldier melted, losing its shape. Menou wasted no time in stomping on the red stone that formed its core and crushing it.

"Ahhh...!"

A perfect victory. Yet Menou didn't celebrate—she just looked at Akari.

She'd wanted to save her energy for trying to stop the train, but because of that last power clash, Menou had drained more than half her remaining energy.

"Akari, you idiot... If you hadn't come, I wouldn't have had to push myself so far...!"

"S-sorry. I don't really know what I did, but I'm sorry. I guess I kinda got in your— Oof!"

"You! Certainly! Did!"

Menou yanked on Akari's cheeks in frustration.

"But your punishment will have to wait. I'm very busy right now."

"Wha—?! Besides pulling my cheeks?!"

"You don't know the half of it!"

Menou gave up on punishing Akari for the time being and turned toward the engine. Though she hated to admit it, Akari's intervention had bought her a bit more time.

Quickly inspecting the state of the engine, Menou slumped her shoulders.

“I knew it...”

The brake valve was broken beyond any hope of repair.

Looking confused by Menou’s crestfallen state, Akari anxiously peered over her shoulder.

“Hey, Menou, is there a problem? That thing looks like it’s busted.”

“Yes, to tell the truth... Ah.”

Menou couldn’t hide it any longer. Just as she was steeling herself to tell Akari about the imminent train accident so that she could at least brace herself, she noticed something.

She raised her head and gazed intently at Akari.

“Um, what’s up, Menou? Hee-hee. Don’t stare at me like that! You’re making me blush! Am I so cute that you can’t look away? Well, um, I think you’re really pretty, too!”

Akari was evidently flustered by being stared at so directly, but that didn’t matter right now. Menou ignored her babbling and considered Akari’s special abilities.

Menou didn’t have enough power to force the train to stop...but what about an Otherworlder with exceptional conjuring aptitude?

“...Akari.”

The plan was deeply flawed.

Still, Menou hesitated for only a moment.

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course.”

The response was immediate.

Akari didn’t even question why Menou would ask her such a thing.

“That goes without saying. I believe in you, Menou!”

Akari smiled brightly, with an almost bizarre level of faith.

Standing on top of the train, Menou squinted intently at the rapidly passing scenery as her ponytail whipped behind her.

Up ahead, she could see the next stop. It was still only a speck in the distance, but they were getting closer by the second as they sped along the rails. Normally, the train would be slowing down around now to keep the service schedule on track, but this train currently couldn't decelerate at all.

She'd asked the mechanics to stop the Guiding engine, but now that the train had picked up this much speed, it would be quite difficult to bring it to a complete halt without brakes. They hadn't gone off the tracks yet, since there weren't any major curves in the track so far, but because the train couldn't adjust its speed properly, it was already starting to catch up to the train in front of it.

At this rate, they would crash into that train just as they reached the station.

The only way to get all the passengers out alive was to force the train to stop.

"M-M-M-Menou?"

As Menou stared seriously into the distance, Akari's knees shook with fear. She was standing on top of the train, too, her hair flapping in the wind, barely holding her skirt down with one hand.

"Um, this is super scary! Why are we on top of a train?!"

Akari's eyes were filled with tears. Menou shrugged.

"This is the easiest way to see what's going on up ahead."

"But, Menooou! I don't think it's safe to climb onto the roof of a train without railings or anything! It's so scary!!"

"Yes. This is an emergency. I know you're scared, but please calm down."

"I caaan't! And your face is scary right now, too. If you ask me, I like you even better when you smile!"

Menou couldn't help smiling a little at Akari's half-screamed goofiness.

"It's fiiine. Here, hold my hand. That's a little better, right?"

Menou smiled obligingly and held out her hand, and Akari's face shifted from

a fearful expression to a brilliant grin.

“Hee-hee, I knew it. You’re cuter when you smile, Menou!”

“Thank you, I suppose. And your smile is impressively empty-headed.”

“Huh? Was that a compliment?”

“Yes, of course.”

Akari’s mood improved instantly when they held hands, so Menou flashed her another smile and went back to looking at the train.

The train was a mass of steel that could carry hundreds of people. They had to stop it—and without anyone getting hurt.

Naturally, accomplishing this alone would be incredibly difficult. It wasn’t impossible with enough use of conjuring, but the problem was that Menou didn’t have nearly enough Guiding Force to cancel out the kinetic energy of the moving train.

That was where Akari would come in.

“So as I was saying, I’ll be borrowing your power to use conjuring to stop this train.”

“Okay.”

Menou’s idea was to draw out Akari’s powers and cover for the power she herself was lacking.

As an Otherworlder, Akari had an incredible store of energy. Its quality and quantity should be more than enough.

However, it wouldn’t be easy.

For one thing, Akari couldn’t carefully control her Guiding Force. Her use of conjuring was practically unconscious, and the only way she could control it was with her Pure Concept of *Time*.

So Menou would be the one to direct Akari’s conjuring. That was part of the reason she had offered to hold the girl’s hand.

“...I’m sorry. Just so you know, this might hurt quite a bit.”

This energy was produced by the soul, controlled by the will, and became one with the body.

It was relatively easy to manipulate something like the conjured soldier, which had no soul or spirit, but even then, the resistance made it much harder.

Under normal circumstances, most people weren't compatible with someone else's mental state. Their body, soul, and spirit would all rebel against the presence of another's Guiding Force. Both the target and even the intruder would experience the same natural resistance.

Thus, it was normally impossible to control someone else's Guiding Force.

The only way to achieve this would be to break the other person's soul and spirit to reduce their resistance, or to share a strong mutual trust. With the former approach, the body's resistance would still remain, but the latter required enough of a bond to completely entrust everything to each other.

It certainly wasn't a recommended method for people who had met only two days prior.

But it wasn't impossible.

Menou was placing her bets on the remarkable unearned trust that Akari showed her.

And for Menou herself, it wouldn't be a problem.

When her entire hometown turned white and fell apart, Menou lost almost all of herself. Since the line between her own self and those around her was once blurred away to nothing, she could easily connect her energy to other people.

Akari looked a little troubled by Menou's explanation, but she still nodded.

"I don't wanna be in pain, but... I'm sure it'll be fine as long as I'm with you, Menou."

"Thank you. That's an enormous help... Really."

With that, Menou charged her scripture with power.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:2—Invoke [Drive the stake and make known the ground where all shall begin.]

A moment later, the power passed from the top of the train to the ground and even below, embedding a wedge of energy in the earthen vein below the tracks.

The first step was a success. Menou didn't need to use Akari's energy yet.

Barely sparing a moment to breathe, Menou continued to send power flowing through the scripture.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 8:12—Remote Invoke [Kneel before the gate, for it is the path to the Lord.]

A gate of light formed on the tracks behind the train, where it had already passed.

Instead of using herself as the target, Menou had activated the conjuring at the area where she had just driven the wedge into the earthen vein.

Once it rapidly formed over the rail behind the train, the gate of light slowly opened.

This created a powerful effect that seemed to pull everything in range toward the open gate.

The light gate was a kind of conjuring used for capturing things. As it attempted to draw in the train, which had been designated as the target, the power sparkled in the form of streaks of light, dragging on the train in the direction of the gate.

The pull of the light slowed the train ever so slightly. However, the effect was so minor that it could barely be felt. Menou's remaining Guiding Force drained far faster than it could chip away at the energy of the speeding train.

But even as the energy in her soul dried up, Menou remained calm.

"It's time, Akari."

"...Okay!"

Akari closed her eyes, perhaps bracing for the pain.

As delicately as possible, Menou let the last dregs of her Guiding Force go into Akari through their linked hands.

Guiding Force: Connect—Akari Tokitou—

There was virtually no resistance.

Surprised by the smoothness of the connection, Menou pressed on from Akari's spirit to her soul, then gave a shudder.

Something was there.

It was something strangely nostalgic but undeniably *different*. Concentrated within Akari was something vast that should be omnipresent in this world but not inside a person.

A cold shiver ran up Menou's spine.

The unnatural "something" that was making her blood run cold was a Pure Concept. It was so vast, deep, and terrifying that even brushing against it like this made it clear that a human should never touch it.

With the caution of a tightrope walker, Menou delicately isolated the power that welled up at the surface of Akari's body, taking care not to touch the Pure Concept in her soul.

Extract [Power]—

"...Ah!"

Akari's shoulders twitched. Her cheeks flushed, and she let out a warm gasp.

"Ah... Menou's... Ngh. Inside meee..."

"Would you mind not making this so weird...?"

Akari's reactions sounded unnecessarily sexual.

As Menou continued sustaining the remote conjuring, she narrowed her eyes at Akari, whose blush only deepened.

"B-buuut...it really...tiiickles..."

"...Well, I'm glad it's no worse than that."

Unlike Momo's usual calculated approach, Akari's voice had a tint of natural seductiveness that Menou did her best to ignore.

Normally, if one attempted to control someone else's energy, it wouldn't be

unusual for both parties to end up in extreme pain. It was a process that involved touching not only the body but the spirit, and sometimes even the soul. It was natural to react unpleasantly to being so deeply connected, so extreme reactions were normal.

While Menou was used to her own body, soul, and spirit not putting up resistance, Akari was accepting the intrusion of Menou's power with an almost frightening lack of resistance.

It was fortunate that her reaction was nothing more than "ticklish," but that must be due to the fact that Akari's trust in Menou was simply that profound.

From the bottom of her heart and the depths of her soul. So much so that Menou could pass right through her body and spirit.

At that very moment, Menou could feel for herself Akari's faith in her.

She had no idea why this girl could entrust herself to Menou so completely.

But as an Executioner, it was natural for her to make use of that trust however she could. Menou concentrated even more intently.

—via Menou—Guiding Force: Supplement—Maintain Invoke [Kneel before the gate, for it is the path to the Lord.]

The gate of light that had formed far behind them grew much larger.

It had been getting smaller as it disappeared into the distance, but now it suddenly swelled in size. The transformation was so rapid that it made it difficult to gauge the distance, but it wasn't just the sudden growth of the gate that had changed.

The train was slowing as rapidly as if it had used emergency brakes.

The recoil flung their bodies in the opposite direction of the train's movement. Menou quickly caught her balance and pulled Akari close to prevent the girl from falling. Of course, she did this without losing her focus or interrupting the conjuring. With the finesse of a spider weaving a delicate web, she used the power drawn from Akari to maintain it.

It was difficult to remotely maintain conjuring that had been created using the earthen vein. The conjuring had to be immense enough to cancel out the

train's kinetic energy, but also delicate enough that it didn't send the train careening off the tracks. And the farther they were from the area where the conjuring was set up, the harder it became to keep it going.

Menou felt like her body might be torn in two. While absorbing power far beyond her level of tolerance, she controlled it more precisely than she ever had before. The tug of war between these two demands mercilessly wore down Menou's spirit.

"Ah...nngh..."

The pressure on Menou's will was just as strong as the force stopping the train. Even as she surpassed the limits of her ability to absorb energy, she forced her body to bear the pain.

The train was gradually losing speed. Almost there. As her consciousness threatened to tear apart, Menou looked toward the front of the train without moving anything except her eyes. The station was close. She could see the other train that was already stopped there. Menou strained her spirit and summoned even more power. They were not going to crash, no matter what it took. She clenched her jaw hard enough to crack a tooth. There was no time even to breathe. She had to keep controlling the conjuring all the way to the limit.

Slower, slower, the wheels ground to a halt—and finally, the train stopped.

The dreaded impact of a crash never came.

"Aaaah!" Menou gasped for breath.

As she released the spell, her entire body was drenched in sweat. She began breathing again, having stopped unconsciously somewhere along the way. Each time she inhaled, her lungs swelled. Her vision was flickering in and out—she must have been running low on oxygen.

As she slowly steadied her breaths, her vision returned to normal.

Menou looked ahead.

There was less than a single train car's worth of distance between this and the next train.

Cheers erupted from inside the cars. Were they from the passengers,

engineers, or everyone all together? Regardless, they had been saved, and their celebratory cries echoed.

Menou's shoulders sagged. Released from the tension that had held her up, she slumped over and found herself being supported by someone.

It was Akari.

"You did it, Menou!"

This time, it was Akari who was holding Menou, squeezing her tightly.

"I knew you could do it. You saved eeeveryone on the train. You're the best priestess ever!"

"If you say so."

Absently nodding along at Akari's excitement, Menou looked down, her expression softening. The train conductors and staff were confirming all the passengers were safe, helping them down from the train cars, and escorting them toward the station.

The little girl they'd met on the platform was among them. She somehow noticed Menou on the roof and waved with an innocent smile.

"That little girl is safe, too. It's all thanks to you, Menou."

"...Mm, I suppose."

Waving back with a smile, Menou allowed a hint of shyness into her demeanor as she nodded.

"A priestess must be pure, proper, and powerful, after all."

Even if it was only an act...Menou was happy to be able to proudly say that she had saved people.



Menou first learned about Japan during her training in the monastery.

Those who are chosen to become part of the Faust are always female—and orphans as well.

Members of the Faust cannot get married. Once someone becomes a priestess, she will never be allowed to have a family. If ever she wishes to get married, she must give up her position. The official reason was that priestesses devoted their whole selves to the Lord, but these rules were actually in place to prevent partiality due to family, since the Faust have such powerful influence.

At any rate, there was one monastery that collected and trained particularly high-achieving girls.

The headquarters of the Faust, which held sway over the entire continent. Located deep in the holy land, it was isolated from the outside world. When young Menou was brought to this monastery by her Master, a harsh life awaited her.

The intensive training was intended to cultivate the girls’ physical and conjuring-related abilities. This included instruction in deception, survival, and many other skills. They engaged in thorough study of every culture, subject, and specialization imaginable; many students dropped out, unable to keep up with the rigorous curriculum.

Menou was never especially talented, but she spent her days in the monastery where her Master brought her.

They were educated especially thoroughly on the nation called Japan.

The more she learned about it, the more strange a place it seemed.

Its systems were far more complex than any societies she’d encountered on the way to this monastery, and its unique arts and technologies showed no trace of conjuring. It all seemed so unfamiliar that when she learned it was in

another world, it made perfect sense.

However, when they were told that people from that place were considered taboo without exception, the young Menou was confused.

“And it’s forbidden? ...So people who come from there can’t go back?”

“Good question, Menou.”

Remembering the girl who turned her town pure white, Menou looked up at her teacher, the tall priestess with the dark-red hair.

“Can Otherworlders who are summoned here not go back to their world? The answer lies with the ancient civilization where humanity once reached its peak of glory.”

“Right.”

Very long ago, before the social estates were divided into three and the Lord put in place the current world structure, there was an era in which human culture bloomed. This ancient civilization conquered the land, traversed the seas, and even ventured into the sky and beyond the stars.

“Their culture was so advanced that it was said nothing was impossible. That prosperity was accomplished with the help of many Otherworlders, and more important, rampant use of the greatest taboo of all—Pure Concepts.”

The civilization that had actively worked together with Otherworlders, making cultural strides based on the knowledge they shared and with the help of conjuring drawn from the Concept Dimension, was one day destroyed by four Human Errors.

Sword of Salt. Starhusk. Pandemonium. Mechanical Society.

These enormous calamities, known as the Four Major Human Errors, left severe scars on the planet even now.

“The ancient civilization achieved an incredibly high standard of living, but they were dependent on Otherworlders. So much so that the language of this world even became one with the Otherworlders’ mother tongue.”

The Master pursed her lips.

This civilization had long since fallen, but it proved how valuable Pure Concepts and the knowledge of Otherworlders could be. Surviving artifacts from that era were known as “ancient relics” and highly prized. Most of them were treated as artwork, but the few that were still functional were considered national treasures.

“And even then, it’s said that it was impossible for Otherworlders to go back.”

In other words, even though the people who came from Japan didn’t want to be brought here, there was no way to send them back.

“As soon as they arrive in this world, a Pure Concept is attached to their souls. They cannot go home. So the only solution is to kill any Otherworlders who come here.”

“But did those people do anything wrong?”

“Not really? I’m sure some of them are bad, but as far as I know, most are good people.”

“Then is the ideology of their world dangerous?”

“Nope. I’m sure their world has many different beliefs, just as ours.”

“Then why? Surely, there must be some other way besides killing them, right...?”

“No, there isn’t.”

The Master, who was in charge of this unique monastery that trained Executioners, didn’t stop to think for a moment before responding.

“Why do we kill them? Because we are the villains.”

She spoke deliberately and logically, as if to drill it into the young Menou.

“For justice? For faith? For the Lord? For peace? There’s no excuse. We aren’t on the side of righteousness. We will not be rewarded. We will not be commended. We will not be mourned. We’ll be hated and resented. And someday, we will live out our usefulness and be tossed aside. That is the sort of villains we are.”

The Master leaned in close and whispered in Menou’s ear.

“So kill them.”

In order to carve it into her young heart, her flesh, and the very marrow of her bones.

“Whether the target is good or bad, kill anything that carries a Pure Concept. Kill them all, by any means necessary. Deceive and murder them. Catch them by surprise and eliminate them. Take their hand and exterminate them. Speak words of friendship and destroy them. Whisper words of love and kill them. Use every cowardly, dirty, underhanded method available. Keep on killing, staining your hands in dirt and blood, until the day you die.”

It was a strange lesson.

Not for the sake of the world, or for peace, or for their great Lord, or even for the Faust. The Master offered no words of comfort toward the awful deed.

Kill because you are the villain.

This lesson, which refused to justify the students’ actions, would be difficult for any ordinary person to accept.

“Remember your hometown. That’s what Otherworlders do.”

Having received such unusual wisdom, Menou sat in thoughtful silence for a moment, then suddenly brought up a different subject entirely.

“Master, do you know the girl who came here recently, who’s just two years younger than me?”

“Nope.”

“I see. She’s very cute.”

There was an adorable, fluffy-haired girl who had just come to the monastery.

Menou remembered her face, which she’d laid eyes on yesterday.

“You see, she cries a lot.”

“...So what?”

Children crying during training was probably nothing unusual to the Master. She looked disinterested, but Menou didn’t pay any mind to her reaction.

There was something else that Menou was concerned about.

That girl always wept at the end of each training or lesson.

I hate this place. I don't want to fight. Everyone here has a few screws loose.

She kept on crying, even though the fact that she was here must mean she had nowhere else to call home.

Whenever Menou approached her, the girl would shoo her away in tears. When she tried to reach out a hand to comfort her, the crying girl would scream "Don't touch me!" and slap her away. She glared at Menou every single time, saying she hated anyone who accepted the idea of murder, rejecting her over and over.

No doubt this girl hated Menou.

All Menou could really do was sit close by until the girl stopped crying.

But when she listened to the girl's complaints, Menou couldn't help thinking that the girl was absolutely right.

"Anyone would object to killing the innocent, I think. It's perfectly natural to cry at the idea of becoming someone who executes good people."

"...And?" The Master looked less interested by the second, but Menou just kept going.

"We all want to be praised, and loved, and accepted, I think. But if we kill good people, then we lose that luxury."

"....."

This wasn't just about the girl with fluffy hair.

None of them wanted to become killers.

Would they give up crying and become expressionless? Would they fool themselves by putting on a sardonic smile? Would they devote themselves to their faith and trust that they were doing the right thing?

The girls' hearts were changing in many different directions, but they all shared one mutual feeling.

They didn't want to kill people.

Which was exactly why they had to change.

“Only a bad person would kill a good person who hasn’t done anything wrong.”

Even Menou, whose memories had been made white, understood that much.

“So, Master...”

You’re still gonna keep complaining? The Master looked displeased, but then her face froze when Menou continued.

“...I’ll kill more of these forbidden entities than anyone else, as many as I can.”

The Master gaped at her, dumbfounded.

Menou looked right into her Master’s face and explained her logic.

“I’m sure nobody here wants to murder the innocent. They’re all normal people.”

Unlike me.

They weren’t like Menou, who had lost her hometown and memories, who had nothing precious to her.

These children all had pasts, all had so much more than just a name.

“So I’ll kill in everyone else’s stead. I’ll kill as many people as I can.”

That way, the others wouldn’t be forced to kill innocent people—or at least not quite as often.

Menou had made up her mind.

She didn’t have the power to change the world, but she could still dirty her hands in someone else’s place.

“I will be pure, proper, and powerful. I’ll become a villain.”

“...Ha!”

The Master burst out laughing.

“Ah-ha-ha! Bah-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! As many as you can? In everyone else’s stead? You? Kill? Bah-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha... You really are an idiot.”

She abruptly stopped laughing, leaning in close to Menou.

“Menou, your prowess for conjuring isn’t anything special among the candidates who’ve been chosen for this monastery. They’re below average.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Your physical potential is even lower. It’s not at the bottom, but it doesn’t even come close to average.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Regarding your memory, comprehension, reaction, adaptability—your head’s not half-bad, but here, it’s just standard. There are plenty of girls smarter than you. And your faith doesn’t run deep either. Average.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Your face isn’t bad. You’ll probably grow up to be beautiful, enough that you’ll be able to win over your targets, men and women alike. Above average.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“To summarize, slightly below average. Pretty mediocre starting point, don’t you think? And you’re saying you’ll become as strong as me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I see. Then I’ll teach you everything I know. Everything I am. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Menou met her eyes squarely.

The Master was a Faust instructor, formerly the Executioner Flare.

She hunted more taboos than anyone else, making her essentially a living legend.

“Master, please make me into an Executioner.”

“All right. I’ll train you into a top-tier, full-fledged one.”

She opened her mouth wide and laughed, looking genuinely entertained.

“You’ll absorb everything I am with that blanched-white soul and spirit of yours. And if someday it’s all broken down by happiness, and you still manage

to survive...well, then you'll surpass even me."

"Yes, Master."

"Bah-ha-ha, good answer. First, we'll learn Guiding Camouflage, to do something about your horrible control over your powers."

She half-heartedly placed her hand on Menou's head.

"And we should do something about your hair. Oftentimes, women can win over a target with looks alone. Your looks are a weapon. So it's important to be stylish."

"Yes, ma'am. Stylish. I see."

Thus, Menou was to be reborn as her teacher's masterpiece, Flarete.

At the Ancient Capital

“We will be arriving at Garm shortly. All passengers, please prepare for arrival.”

“...Mmn.”

The voice roused Menou from her slumber.

She felt as if she'd been dreaming of the past, but whatever memories she'd been reliving left her as she woke.

They were in the economy car. The train would be arriving at its final stop shortly; conductors were going around to check on each car.

Akari had already been exhausted, and even Menou wound up falling into a deep slumber after everything that happened. As she blinked dazedly at her surroundings, she saw the other passengers beginning to gather their belongings.

After the terrorist incident, the passengers transferred to a different train.

Once everyone had calmed down, Menou and Akari spent the night in seats in the economy car of the new train. They were offered better seats as thanks for their helpful deeds, but Menou firmly declined out of an overabundance of caution, just in case they somehow ended up in the same car as Ashuna against all odds.

After that, things proceeded smoothly, and they arrived in Garm. Momo would likely be on a later train.

Akari was leaning against Menou as she slept. Her somewhat long black hair tickled Menou's neck, while her long lashes fluttered in her sleep.

She was utterly defenseless.

Clearly, she trusted Menou completely. It would be crazy to doubt that after they were able to connect so smoothly via Guiding Force.

As she felt the sleeping Akari's weight and warmth against her, Menou couldn't help but wonder why.

They had only just met three days ago.

But it wasn't a bad feeling.

Menou gazed at Akari's sweet, sleeping face for a moment before gently shaking her shoulder.

"Wake up, Akari. We're almost there."

"Wha—? ...Oh. Mm'kay. Mornin'?"

"Yes, it is. Good morning, sleepyhead."

"Awww, man. Why does night hafta end? I wanna sleep s'more... So yeah, g'night, Menou. Zzzz..."

"Don't be silly. Wake up."

"Phweeee?!"

As Akari started to doze back off, Menou lightly pinched her cheek. Akari shrieked, but Menou ignored her and started gathering their things.

Finally waking up, Akari yawned and stretched.

"Ahhh... So we're about to reach what's-it-called, huh?"

"Indeed. Just take a look." Menou pointed at the city, which was visible through the window.

The train was rapidly approaching a city made largely of stone. At the city's heart was the former royal castle and a grand cathedral. Both were magnificent structures with storied histories, but the most famous feature of the ancient capital Garm was the Guiding Light rising from the other side of the city.

"Whoa! What the heck is that?! It's so bright! It's like the sun!"

"Heh. Impressive, isn't it?"

Akari forgot her sleepiness as she exclaimed delightedly, and Menou smiled proudly.

The light seemed to reach up into the heavens. It was the glow of the barrier

to the astral vein. One of the church's greatest achievements in technology using Guiding Force, it drew power from the earthen vein and connected it to the heavenly vein, thereby protecting inhabited human settlements from the Wild Frontier.

Shielded by the glowing light, the starting point of the border pilgrimage route was also the former capital of Grisarika Kingdom.

"That's the ancient capital Garm."

They had arrived at the destination where Akari was to be killed.

The ancient capital Garm.

It was the former royal capital of Grisarika Kingdom and still a major city on the border with the Wild Frontier. Garm was a very safe city, known for its beautiful sights. As a result, it saw a great deal of tourism. Once they stepped onto the platform, Menou confidently led the way down the main road and past a fountain plaza, heading toward the cathedral in the central district. Archbishop Orwell should be there to greet her.

Following Menou, Akari looked around at the stone architecture, her eyes sparkling.

"Menou! Hey, Menou! I really wanna go sightseeing!"

"Fair enough. If we have time. But we have things to do now, so it'll have to wait until later. We can hardly go sightseeing without securing a hotel."

"Later, then! It's a promise. A date! So you can't break it, okay?!"

"Yes, yes."

Akari seemed very hyperactive at the moment, Menou thought as she absently responded to the girl. Was it because the city was so scenic or because she was expecting to be back in Japan soon? Either way, the Otherworlder was so restless, they wound up holding hands.

Otherwise, Menou was afraid Akari would get lost if she took her eyes off her for a second. Any chance she got, Akari pulled Menou along by the hand toward one sight or another. Menou felt like she was taking a particularly large dog for a walk.

“Wow, Menou! That building’s so pretty! It’s a castle! Can we go inside there?!”

“Ah, that’s the former royal castle.”

Akari was excitedly pointing at a castle surrounded by a moat. At present, part of it was open to the public for sightseeing, while other parts were used as a station for the Order of Knights to carry out their law enforcement duties.

That was the last place Menou wanted to go near in this city.

“Our business is over here. That place isn’t on the way.”

“Awww, c’moon...”

Menou dragged away the reluctant girl. Before long, they arrived at an angular cathedral made of white stones.

It had a bell tower with a clock and a sharp steeple, from which the transepts spread in all directions. This was a church of great historical value, the pinnacle of an architectural style that had prospered here about a hundred years ago.

“Ooh, this place is pretty, too.”

“We’re here on business, not for pleasure. But the interior is even more impressive than the exterior, so perhaps we can take a nice long look around afterward.”

“Kay!”

When Menou stated her business, they were escorted into the cathedral, so Orwell must have sent word about the situation in advance.

Indeed, the ornamentation inside was even more detailed than the outside. Overhead was an arched ceiling, with decorative stained glass images all around. It had a formidable presence, yet it was so finely made that the details were very pronounced.

“Whoooa... Cool...”

“Close your mouth, Akari. You look like an idiot.”

Akari’s mouth was hanging open as she stared around, but she shut it at once when Menou scolded her.

“An idiot, huh...? Y’know, you can be pretty mean sometimes, Menou. Even though I like you so, sooo much! I think you could stand to show me a little more love!”

“I don’t know how much ‘sooo much’ is exactly, but I’m only mean when you act like a ditz.”

“Waaah. How can you be so mean to me when I’m going home soon?!”

“I’m being normal. I’m always perfectly normal.”

The pair teased each other as they walked through the church.

“But you’re not wrong. This place really is remarkable. This is actually my first time going inside—it’s quite overwhelming.”

Though it seemed like Menou was agreeing with Akari, she was actually observing something quite different.

Since Menou had intimate knowledge of conjuring studies like crestology, materialogy, and conjuration studies, she could understand from a practical perspective just how incredible this cathedral was. The detailed construction certainly had aesthetic appeal and a historical style of architecture.

However, it was more than just pretty to look at.

These details had a very practical use.

The cathedral also served as an emergency evacuation shelter. If the conjuring crests that appeared to be decorations were activated, it would likely become an impregnable fortress. In addition to creating a barrier around the outside wall, it created interior boundaries as well. Inspecting the construction of the crests out of pure curiosity, Menou continued walking as they were led into a room that was closed off to the general public.

Waiting inside was an elderly woman escorted by a young priestess.

The old woman wore priestess robes made from thick white cloth, embroidered with gold thread. Knowing that only the archbishop was permitted to wear such clothes, Menou bowed her head in reverence.

“Archbishop Orwell. It’s an honor for you to greet us.”

They had communicated through the altar before, but this was the first time Menou was officially meeting her in person. Following suit after Menou, Akari hastily ducked her head.

“The pleasure is mine. I understand the situation, so please leave it to me. We’ll have things taken care of in no time... Ms. Akari, I understand you’ve been through some misfortune, but please rest easy now.”

“Th-thanks!”

Evidently sensing the archbishop’s gravitas, Akari responded in a shrill, nervous voice.

Orwell smiled warmly in response, then turned her attention to Menou.

“Ms. Menou, once the ceremony to send Ms. Akari home is complete, what do you plan to do? If you wish to embark on a pilgrimage across the border, we can take care of your travel expenses.”

“Really? Thank you so much...!”

“Oh, don’t mention it. Now, the ceremony will be ready the day after tomorrow. I would love to sit and have a chat with you before then.”

“Yes, of course.”

Since Akari was present, the official story was that they were preparing a ceremony to send her back to her world, but in truth, it was intended to kill her.

Menou had already been informed that it would take time to prepare the ceremony. As she bowed her head deeply, Orwell smiled.

“And one more thing, Ms. Menou. Including today, you’ll be staying here in the city for three days, yes? I have a request I’d like to ask of you, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“...O-of course.”

As the priestess attending the archbishop produced some documents, Menou inwardly heaved a sigh.

No wonder she had become the supposedly benevolent archbishop. Clearly, she wasn’t the sort of person to give things out for free. However, Orwell was

kind enough to set them up with a hotel while they were staying in Garm.

The hotel lent out and managed old monasteries and churches that had been remodeled for such purposes. Normally, staying in such culturally important buildings was considerably costly. But Menou and Akari would be staying there for free.

“She really didn’t have to do this...”

Menou had never been put up so luxuriously in all her missions as an Executioner.

Executioners from the holy land were seen as parasites to other parishes. Though they were ranked in the Faust all the same, the job was undeniably a dirty one. Since they showed up and acted outside the local chain of command, and even claimed expenses for their missions, the Executioners were often openly despised by the Faust of their respective parishes.

Normally, simply being ignored would be preferable treatment, yet now Menou was being housed in a fancy hotel, served with a smile, and given full cooperation on her mission. It was unheard-of. Menou expressed her gratitude to Orwell.

A certain idiot was shaking Menou’s shoulders, oblivious to her state of mind.

“Hey, can we go sightseeing now? Menooou? C’mon, let’s gooo! It’s still early eveniiii. We’re young, so our night’s just getting started, right? Riiight?”

“Stop shaking me already! Not today. I have to write up an expense list for my pilgrimage.”

“Awww, c’mon! Let’s have fuuun. I wanna hang out with you, Menou! ...You don’t wanna hang out with me?”

“I want to calculate my expenses. Truly. Desperately.”

“Mrr...”

Akari’s expression shifted from pleading to pouting, but Menou paid no attention to her, looking instead at the map. They were going to provide expenses for her. It was only courteous to submit a comprehensive projection.

Thoroughly ignored, Akari rolled onto the bed.

“Menou, you’re so meeean... What did that old lady ask you to do, anyway?”

“Nothing too important.”

“Really? But if you do it, they’re gonna give you money for, uh...the border pilgrimage route thingy, right?”

“Yeah. Crossing the border means passing through the Wild Frontier, so it’s pretty hard.”

Menou half-heartedly explained to Akari as she calculated the funds needed for a pilgrimage across the border.

“You mentioned that Wild Frontier place on the train, right? What is it, exactly?”

“Basically, it’s a general term for areas where humans were unable to settle. It’s a dangerous environment, but there’s a relatively safe route through it known as the pilgrimage route. On the other hand, places where humanity *has* been able to settle and create a community are known as ‘nations’... But you’re going back to your own world soon, so you don’t need to worry about all that.”

“Riiight...”

The subject must have gotten too difficult, because Akari didn’t ask any more questions. She probably just wanted Menou’s attention and didn’t care much about the actual facts.

“But if we’re not going sightseeing, I guess I’ll take a bath.”

“Enjoy. Nice that each room here has its own bathtub and shower.”

“Yeah. Oh, I know. Why don’t you take a bath with me? We can wash each other!”

“Wash each other? Listen...”

Akari looked as if she’d come up with a genius plan. Menou let out a sigh.

“You know, this isn’t the first time I’ve noticed, but...you really ought to be more careful about getting close to people so quickly. You know that, right?”

“Huh? Nah, not really.”

They had only known each other for less than three full days, yet Akari was

inviting her to bathe together. Menou turned back to her work, but Akari's face was suddenly very close to hers.

"I told you when we first met, remember? That it felt like fate."

Menou looked up at her doubtfully, caught off guard by Akari's expression.

The girl looked surprisingly serious.

"If you think I'd act like this toward just anyone, you're dead wrong! I'm only trying to cozy up close to you because I like you so much, Menou. Besides, you seem like the kinda person who wouldn't notice someone's feelings unless they really get in your face about it."

"That's...not true?"

"Oh yeah?"

Akari narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips.

"Then do you know how I'm feeling right now? I wanna spend what little time I have left here being close to you! Do you get it, Menou?"

"Right. Just go take a bath, please. By yourself."

"Hmph! You don't get it."

Why was this girl so sad that she insisted on bathing with someone she'd just met? Menou shooed her away with one hand.

Really, Akari's fondness of her was a mystery.

She could understand Momo's attachment, since they'd known each other for so long, but she and Akari barely knew each other. Since the moment they met, Akari's completely unguarded affection for her was downright bizarre.

"Fate, she says..."

Where in the world did she get that idea? Menou always tried to be sociable toward her targets on a mission, but she had never encountered someone so aggressively friendly. Akari seemed to really believe in things like fate, but Menou couldn't understand the reasoning behind her confident conclusion, no matter how hard she tried.

"Surely there must be some reason..."

But since she couldn't figure it out, she couldn't help being curious.

Still, perhaps there was no need to worry about it any longer. Menou picked up the documents from Orwell and looked them over again.

In addition to the archbishop's request, it contained details on the ceremony for destroying Otherworlders. They hadn't been able to discuss this information in person, since Akari was there.

"...Looks like it should all end as planned."

That was a good thing, so why did she feel a little sad about it?

Once she heard the water running from the shower, Menou stepped out onto the balcony.

However, it wasn't for a breath of fresh air.

"Darliiing!"

As Menou suspected, Momo appeared out of nowhere and latched on to her.

This was a third-floor balcony, but Menou wasn't surprised when her assistant embraced her tightly.

"Your Momo was sooo worried about leaving you on that train that she nearly died of lonelineeeess!"

"Good work back there. And I'm surprised you knew where to find me."

"Of cooourse! I'll always track you down, whether it's through fire, flood, or even the Wild Frontier, darliiing!"

It had only been a day since they last saw each other, but Momo rubbed her face against Menou as if it was a long-awaited reunion.

"Ahhh. I can't believe there were terrorists on our traaain. Oh, listen to this, darliiing. Some damned princess knight called Ashuna showed up, and she was even worse than the terrorists, you knooow. Momo worked sooo hard to keep her away from you, darliiing. That stuck-up princess has instincts as sharp as Master's. She was such a pain that I wanted to crush her to death, but I held back. Instead, I wrapped up our little fight and ran away, then shook her off my trail. Aren't you proud of meee?"

“Yes, yes. Very good.”

“Hee-hee.”

Menou patted Momo’s fluffy hair, and Momo’s cheeks flushed with glee.

“I’m so happyyy. I basically live for your praise, you knooow.”

“All right, all right. So, Momo, do you mind if I ask you a favor?”

Once Momo calmed down a little, Menou pulled out the documents she received at the church, as well as a report of the events on the train from her perspective.

“...We finally reunite, and you want to talk about work alreadyyyy? You’re so cruel.”

“Well, we’re in the middle of a job right now. I can’t help it.”

Momo pouted a little, but this was a request straight from the archbishop herself. Orwell was providing funds for Menou to cross the border, and even going so far as to forge documents for her. Since she owed a debt to someone who ranked high above her, Menou couldn’t exactly refuse her request.

Momo’s frown deepened as she accepted the documents and looked them over.

“A series of disappearances, is iiit? Hmm... And the victims are all young women? Is there a human trafficking problem in this city, maybeee?”

“That doesn’t seem to be the case. They’ve already investigated around the brothels, and they didn’t find anything unusual.”

Orwell’s request was an investigation of the rash of disappearances occurring in this city, which she’d previously mentioned in their call while Menou was in the royal capital.

“There’s a considerable number of people missing, and none of them have been found. It’s no wonder the archbishop is so concerned.”

“Hmm. Maybe some heathens are collecting sacrifices to summon demons?”

“It does seem like it could be related to a Concept of Original Sin, but we don’t have enough information to say for sure just yet.”

“Truuue. Doesn’t this still fall within the knights’ duties, then? Why would the archbishop ask us? And how does she expect us to do it in three days, anywaaay...?”

“We’re not expected to solve it—she just wants a fresh perspective, she says. And if we don’t find anything, that’s all right, according to her.”

Momo’s complaints were correct, but Orwell seemed to be fully aware of all that.

An Executioner had a different perspective from ordinary knights and priestesses. No doubt the archbishop had asked her in the hopes that she might uncover some new clue.

This incident was occurring right in her own backyard, after all. It was no wonder she was willing to try any and all means.

“Just blow it off, theeen.”

“I can’t do that. I owe her.”

“Waaah. Sometimes you’re diligent to a fault. Since this place borders the Wild Frontier, a little crime is inevitable, if you ask meee. Ah, so what are you doing tomorrow?”

“Er, tomorrow...”

Menou had plans in place, but she looked away guiltily.

“I’m, er...sightseeing...with Akari.”

“.....”

The look in Momo’s eyes was indescribable.

The documents in her hand crumpled as she clenched her fist. Even without meeting her eyes, Menou broke out in a cold sweat under the pressure from Momo’s steely gaze. She carefully looked anywhere else.

Truthfully, Menou did feel bad for essentially goofing off while pushing the work on her assistant.

“Right, of cooourse. She does need to be guarded, after all. I get it. If young women are being kidnapped in this city right now, we can’t have that boob-lady

wandering around alone. And you can't investigate these incidents with such an utterly useless girl on your hands, of cooourse."

"E-exactly. I'm so glad you understand, Momo! I'd expect no less of my dear assistant!"

"Riiight."

As Menou talked a little too quickly, Momo graced her with a lovely smile.

"Momo loves you sooo much, darling, so I'll do whatever you saaay... And I'll wrap up this investigation in no time, just you waaait!"

For better or worse, Momo seemed to be revving to go. Menou felt worse about the situation, but she hastily changed the subject.

"And the archbishop is going to prepare the ceremonial hall to take care of the Akari problem. She says it'll be ready by the day after tomorrow."

"Ohhh? The archbishop of this nation really is very cooperative. A ceremony to kill Otherworlders... I'd never heard of such a thing befooore."

"Neither had I. But I suppose it's because Master's general policy was for us to figure it out on our own."

"Ahhh...yes, Master is quite particular. She really hates ceremonial conjuring, since it requires a large group, tooooo."

"Uh-huh."

No matter the mission, their old Master never suggested cooperating with anyone. Other people were just tools to be used, and even those closest to you should always be treated with suspicion of being a forbidden entity, according to her needlessly thorough paranoia. Her emphasis on this lone-wolf approach was evident in their education in the monastery, too.

As Menou nodded in agreement with Momo's assessment, she remembered something else she had to mention.

"Oh, right. Momo."

"Yeees?"

"Be careful of the Order of Knights in this city."

Something one of the terrorists had said still rang in her mind.

“If we don’t make it to Garm, we’re gonna get hanged anyway.”

In other words, if they did manage to make it to Garm, they had a plan in place for their getaway.

That meant the terrorists on the train were almost certainly working with someone in this city. Menou suspected the coconspirators in question were the ancient capital’s Order of Knights.

There was the fact that the terrorists had known the whereabouts of Ashuna, who was a royal but also a knight. The fact that they somehow had obtained prohibited weapons like Guiding guns and the Primary Red Stone. And the fact that they were confident they could get away if they reached Garm, despite their flagrant crimes. Put it all together, and it made sense that they might be connected to the Order of Knights, who were in charge of the law enforcement in Garm, a city that bordered the Wild Frontier.

This was just an educated guess, of course. Menou had no proof.

However, the probability was very high. It might not be the entire Order of Knights, but there must be some number of them who were corrupted.

“All riiight. I understaaand.”

Menou’s advice had been brief, but it seemed to get through to Momo.

Watching as Momo made her way down from the balcony in darkness, swiftly and carefully to avoid being seen, Menou touched the black scarf ribbon that Momo had given her when they were children.

She had worn that ribbon ever since.

“...Maybe I should buy something for Momo.”

She murmured the thought aloud. Momo wasn’t just her assistant. She was her junior, but one that she could always depend on more than anyone else.

Menou felt nothing but gratitude toward her.

I’ll find something she might like when we go out tomorrow and buy it for her to show my appreciation, she decided.

The next day, their sightseeing went smoothly.

As the former royal capital of Grisarika Kingdom, the ancient capital Garm had a storied history.

The capital had been relocated out of necessity when a change in the astral vein resulted in Garm bordering the Wild Frontier, an area where human settlement was impossible. At the same time, it was virtually untouched by modern civilization. Many adventurers aimed to make a killing by finding and selling rare items that couldn't be made by human hands, so now that Garm bordered the place, there were more people of that ilk in the city.

While the shift in occupational demands resulted in a slight decrease in overall public safety, the ancient capital was as lively as it had been in its prime. Amid the thriving crowds, Menou and Akari went on a tour of the biggest sightseeing areas.

Soon, it was their third day in the city.

Menou led Akari toward the cathedral.

"All that sightseeing was sooo fun!"

Everything in this city must have looked remarkably new to the eyes of a Japanese person like Akari. She looked absolutely delighted as she walked beside Menou.

If only you knew, Menou thought.

The Executioner was all too familiar with the fact that the beauty of this town was hiding all of its darkness under the surface.

"This world is pretty rad!"

"I'm glad you think so."

But there was no need to reveal all that to Akari. Instead, Menou simply agreed.

Come tomorrow morning, Akari's life in this otherworld would be over. As far as she knew, she would be going back to Japan. Menou had fooled her into believing as much.

In truth, her life would be over altogether.

Menou's journey with Akari was ending far sooner than she had expected when she first discovered Akari's immortality. She would die in this town, and Menou would travel alone on her pilgrimage out of this nation. That would mark the end of this mission.

Akari skipped along next to Menou, oblivious to her plans.

She was holding Menou's hand, swinging it back and forth happily when they came upon a certain stall.

It was marketed primarily to sightseers. In addition to premade items, customers could create simple handmade accessories. Essentially, it was a tourist attraction that allowed people to make their own souvenirs.

Akari noticed Menou's lingering gaze immediately.

"Are you interested in that stall, Menou?"

"...I suppose. Do you mind if we take a look?"

"Of course!"

Since they had left the hotel early, there was still some time before their scheduled meeting with Orwell. Menou called out to the woman running the stall.

"I'd like to make one of these, please."

Most of the accessories displayed were metal, but the one that caught Menou's eye was a cloth scrunchie.

The woman handed her the materials, and she set about making two of them. Metal decorations that clinked together could make stealth more difficult, so she limited herself to one small accent on each. The smiling shopkeeper cooed in approval at her delicate touch, so Menou murmured vague thanks as she worked, fending off Akari as she slid closer. Before long, Menou had finished the two scrunchies.

"There. All done."

Menou wasn't one to sing her own praises, but she thought they had come

out simple yet cute.

Akari looked at the finished product with her eyes sparkling.

“Hey, Menou. Since you made two, that must mean...you want to match with me!”

“Um, no?”

“No?!”

Where did she get that idea? Menou carefully put the purchased scrunchies into a bag.

“This is for a junior of mine. She’s always looking out for me.”

She was acting on the idea she’d thought of the day before: a symbol of gratitude to thank Momo for all her hard work.

Akari puffed up her cheeks unhappily.

“Why?! We’re saying our good-byes soon, but you’re not gonna give me anything?!”

“Er...”

She can be so difficult, Menou thought, but coldly pushing her away would only make it worse. And from Akari’s point of view, it was true that they were about to go their separate ways.

Akari stared at Menou intently. Smelling a business opportunity, the shopkeeper put on her best smile.

Oh, all right. Menou sighed.

“Let me see that for a second.”

She reached over and plucked off Akari’s headband to make something different from the scrunchies.

Menou’s fingers moved swiftly, forming a flower shape out of the cloth. She tied this to the headband as a flower decoration, put it back on Akari’s head, and smiled.

“There. Very cute.”

“...Hee-hee.” Akari broke into a smile, peering into the mirror at the stall and blushing happily. “You’ve got good taste, Menou. I like that about you, too.”

“Thanks. It’s the perfect accessory for someone who’s all hearts and flowers, if I do say so myself.”

“Hey, did you just say something super mean?!”

Menou ignored Akari’s cry as she paid the shopkeeper. The real reason she had chosen a flower decoration was simple.

It was an offering, a tribute to Akari’s imminent death.

Once they finished at the accessory stall, Menou and Akari headed for the cathedral, where a great deal of worshippers and tourists were leaving the chapel area. They weaved their way against the flow of the crowd into the room where they were brought before and found Orwell waiting for them.

“Welcome. Over here, Ms. Menou. You too, Ms. Akari.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Okaaay!”

Orwell led the way, her cane in hand. Menou and Akari followed her through the chapel room and deep into the inner sanctum.



“I know I’m going home, but I kinda wish I could stay here a little longer, y’know? I’ll probably never get to go to another world again.”

“Listen, Akari. You probably shouldn’t keep saying things like that.”

“Indeed. There are some people who wish to go home but can’t. It’s better to appreciate your good fortune.”

“Hrmm, true. I’m sorry. That wasn’t very considerate of me,” Akari apologized meekly. Her ability to be understanding was one of her good points, at least. “I just wanted to spend more time with Menou, that’s all.”

“Oh my. You two seem to have gotten quite close.”

“Of course! Right, Menou?”

“Uh-huh. Yeah.”

They chatted aimlessly as they walked through the hallway and down a staircase. They seemed to be heading for the mausoleum beneath the cathedral. The sound of their slow footsteps mingled with that of the cane on the stone steps, echoing as the three of them made their way down the dimly lit stairs.

At the bottom of the steps was a large door.

It was a stone door with no lock or handle, but it had a special mechanism that identified people through their energy. Orwell placed her hand on the door.

Guiding Force: Connect—Door, Crest—Authenticate [Open Door]

The archbishop’s delicate gesture opened the door.

Behind it must be the ceremony hall for destroying Otherworlders regardless of their Pure Concept.

Menou’s mission would be over soon.

Meanwhile, Momo had made her way into the sewage system beneath the city.

It was dark, damp, and dank. The sound of the water flowing through the underground channels was anything but pleasant, with the thick, sickly bubbling

clinging unpleasantly to her ears.

Garm was a bustling site of tourism. Its surface cleanliness was a necessary part of that image. The poorest inhabitants had been shunted out of the sightseeing areas and into the slums that had sprung up underground.

Though they supported the foundation of society, they were treated as a garbage dump that never saw the light of day. If something shady was going to happen in this city, nine times out of ten, it would take place in the massive underground sewage system.

The other possibility was that the kidnapped young women were being taken out of the city—in other words, to the Wild Frontier—but Momo doubted that.

“Be careful of the Order of Knights in this city.”

Momo fully understood the meaning of Menou’s words. If the knights were potentially connected with the scoundrels known as adventurers, who worked in the Wild Frontier, then there was only one place to go and investigate: the part of the sewage system under the former royal castle where the knights now made their base.

She used one day to map out an infiltration route and the other two days to enter the sewage system and make her way to the area near the castle.

With only three days, if one lead didn’t yield any results, the investigation would be over. Or so she thought—but along the way, she discovered a hidden passage that led to a very unusual area.

“Woow. Well done, Momo.”

Muttering her own praises, Momo made her way along the passage.

It was a strange place. The passage was made out of something like polished black stone. The walls seemed to swallow the darkness, creating a smoothed-out space. It was obviously intended for use in some kind of ritual, but even Momo had no knowledge of what these materials might be for.

However, judging by the immaculate cleanliness of the passage, it was definitely still being used and maintained.

As Momo continued cautiously down the passage, she suddenly froze.

Around the corner, she sensed someone else's presence.

It was only one person. Whomever it was, they were strong. And they seemed to have noticed Momo's presence, too.

Momo reached into her priestess robes, pulling out a coping saw by the handle.

The other person seemed aware that she had noticed them, too. There was no point in hiding. Deciding to capture the person alive and force information out of them, Momo jumped around the corner—but when she saw her target's face, she let out a groan.

"Ugh."

"Oh-ho?"

As Momo scowled, the other person's sword froze in place, too.

"Why, if it isn't Momo! What a coincidence!"

An unfittingly bright voice echoed through the black passageway.

It was none other than the Princess Knight Ashuna, looking as graceful and dignified as ever even in this strange dark place. Just the other day, they had been fighting to the death, but she waved with both hands as cheerfully as if she'd just run into an old friend on the street.

"This is our second chance meeting in such a short time. And to think it would be here—I'm even more certain this must be fate!"

"Oh, choke on your own tongue and diie..."

Momo sighed deeply, but since it didn't seem like the princess was going to attack her, she tucked away her coping saw. Ashuna was known for wandering around and sticking her nose into all sorts of affairs, but she wasn't a knight of Garm. She couldn't be connected to this particular incident.

Momo moved forward to continue her investigation, and Ashuna fell into step beside her as if it were perfectly natural. Even when Momo shot a glare at her, Ashuna seemed utterly unbothered.

"How strange. This isn't the sort of place an ordinary priestess would wander

into, now is it?”

“The church is providing me with funds for a pilgrimage in exchange for a little favor. This might be news to you, Princess-poo, but money’s very important, you knooow.”

Momo loaded her words as scathingly as she could, but Ashuna just nodded blithely.

“Ah yes, that makes sense. By the by, your nickname for me is really quite adorable. I thought so on the train, too.”

“Excuuuse me?”

“Well, I’ve never had anyone address me like that before, so it’s quite refreshing. Please call me Ashuna-poo from now on, Momo!”

“Ugh! I’ve never met anyone so annoying in my life!! Die!”

No matter how much verbal abuse Momo hurled at her, it didn’t seem to bother the princess. Momo clicked her tongue irritably and decided to change tactics. Ashuna’s confidence was too high to be swayed by attacks on her character, so perhaps she could target her weapon instead.

“That sword of yours is looking shabby. What happened to that royal toy you were using befoooore?”

“Ah, yes, it got nicked a bit during our fight. I brought it to my most trusted swordsmith for repairs. This is a backup, you see. Hardly worthy of my swordsmanship, to be sure, but it will do for now.”

Despite Momo’s obviously snide attitude, Ashuna’s arrogance and tolerance seemed to know no bounds.

“That battle on the train was electrifying. It’s been a long time since anyone got my blood pumping! How could you run away before we were through? I was left so unsatisfied that I had to come here to let off some steam... But since that led me to run into you yet again, clearly the heavens are on my side!”

“I should’ve just killed you back then. I knew iiit...”

“Hrmm? It would be a huge problem if a mere priestess were to murder a member of the royal family, no?”

“If they found your precious royal body there, they would’ve just assumed you were killed by the terrorists. And nothing mooore.”

The mismatched pair continued down the dark hallway. It was mostly a single straight path, and there were no signs of any other people. Their voices echoed as they continued walking.

“Speaking of the battle on the train, I felt a strange sensation toward the end there. Do you have any idea what caused that creepy feeling, Momo?”

“How should I knooow?”

Momo feigned ignorance with a shrug, but the truth was she had an inkling of the strange feeling’s source.

Akari Tokitou.

After reading and digesting Menou’s report on the situation that unfolded on the train, Momo had formed a theory that Akari may have turned back time in the process.

Judging by the documents Menou gave her, there was a high possibility that the train had been bound for an accident that would have resulted in many casualties. In reality, if Akari had stayed in the economy car and waited, even Menou likely would’ve been unable to stop the accident from happening.

However, that massive disaster had been averted—because Akari had reversed time and prevented it.

Akari must have lost her memories of doing so in the process. Momo suspected the cause of the unpleasant sensation was something akin to motion sickness, as the world shifted away from the course it should have taken.

It was such a massive feat that it was physically sickening, but such a thing was possible only with the horrifying power of Pure Concepts, which was exactly why its users had to be destroyed with great prejudice.

“Sooo? What are you doing here, anyway, Princess Ashuna-poo?”

“Ah, well. When I arrived in Garm and set out to the former royal castle to pay my respects, I caught the foul scent of collusion, so I couldn’t help myself. I decided to follow the trail and secretly slipped into the basement.”

“Hrmm.”

So Momo’s hunch was right.

The Princess Knight’s instincts for these things were impressive. Momo despised Ashuna, but she had to acknowledge her abilities nonetheless.

“And judging by the existence of this bizarre area, it looks like I was dead-on, as usual. My gut never lies.”

As Ashuna was bragging, the two suddenly stopped.

They’d reached the end of the dark hallway and found a ceremonial hall.

It was a domed space engraved with elaborate crests. There were giant statues set up in all four directions and two massive overlapping pentagrams in the center of the room.

The overall atmosphere seemed ancient, but all the materials were brand-new.

“Now, a high-level ceremonial hall is outside my wheelhouse. What in the world is this? I have no idea, myself.”

“Oh. You’re so obsessed with fighting that your knowledge of everything else is that of a chiild, Princess Ashy-poo.”

“Indeed. So I am glad to have you with me, Momo. Investigate for me.”

“Uuugh...”

Ashuna’s area of expertise was obviously in battle. Momo leaned that way herself, but she was still an assistant Executioner. However, the construction of this particular ceremony happened to fall squarely within her field of study.

“This is a teleportation test site.”

Their investigation appeared to be a failure, although not entirely without results. Most likely, this was an experimental test site for the Otherworlder summoning that had taken place in the royal capital.

“The statues against each wall transcend boundaries by opposing the concept of the cardinal directions. The overlapping pentagrams represent the union of two planets in different phases. There’s more to it than just that, but those are

the basics.”

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:1—Invoke [Transcribe the miracle before my eyes, for it must be recorded.]

As Momo inspected the area, she invoked conjuring, recording an image of the room into her scripture as proof.

At first, she assumed the kidnapped women had been brought here through the underground passage and used as materials for summoning demons, but there were no signs that this had occurred. What had happened here was undoubtedly prohibited activity, but this ceremonial hall was proof of heresy committed by the Noblesse, and it was unrelated to the recent disappearances.

“Teleportation, eh? Then the experiments and preparations for the Otherworlder summoning in the royal capital were carried out here, then.”

“Probablyyy.”

Conjuring is the art of willing the power in one’s soul to materialize in the form of a specific phenomenon. There is a limit to what a lone individual can accomplish.

However, that all changed in the case of extraordinary levels of power such as a Pure Concept, which an individual should normally never have. An idea that had built up over time through human history could naturally turn into a form of conjuring; tap into the energy of the astral veins, which runs through the heavenly vein and the earthen vein of the planet; and create a unique power spot. As a result, the concept itself assumed a huge amount of power in the form of Guiding Force.

The forbidden technique known as Concept Conjuring drew from this irregular space, which has become a spot to gather power, so it was capable of conjuring that bended the rules of reality.

“You’re not upseeet, Princess Ashy-poo? This means there’s proof of your father’s crime, you knooow.”

“Oh, that’s fine.”

Ashuna was a member of the Noblesse. Momo was on guard for the

possibility that she might try to destroy the evidence and cut her down to silence her, but the princess didn't show any intention of attacking.

"I won't tolerate anyone committing this kind of foolishness, either. The punishment ought to fit the crime, even if it was committed by my own family."

"Ohhh? Since you like all things powerful, I thought you'd looove Otherworlders, Princess-poo."

"You misjudge me, Momo. The human soul attains the light of energies through intensive study and training. The true beauty of strength lies in the effort it took to earn it. But not so with Otherworlders. They are nothing more than victims."

"Huh."

There was such a thing as conjuring in irregular spaces where power beyond that of any ordinary individual accumulated, but the only way to draw out and use the pure power of the concept was to summon a human from another world and attach the powers of this planet to their soul in the process.

No other ceremony could fuse an entire concept into a soul.

Thus, the frightful power that dwelled within an Otherworlder was known as a "Pure Concept," but it was true that this didn't align with the aesthetic appreciation of power that Ashuna so often boasted.

Still, Momo didn't care about Ashuna one way or another. This wasn't what she'd been instructed to investigate, but if she relayed an image of this place to the Holy Inquisition in the royal capital, it would certainly be a fine gift. *I hope Menou will praise me, too*, she thought, continuing to record images of the room.

"Still, it's strange that they were able to reproduce this so accurately. I doubt Noblesse would have the knowledge and skills to do this, even if they got materials from the Wild Frontier from adventurers, you knooow?"

"Hrm?" Ashuna tilted her head at Momo's statement. "What do you...? Ah, I see. I'm surprised you're so easily swayed, Momo. So you really came here as a 'favor,' eh?"

Ashuna nodded as if she'd made a connection that explained everything.

Momo furrowed her brow at Ashuna's somewhat disappointed tone. She had never been swayed by anyone but Menou. And she had never once referred to Menou's existence in front of the princess.

"What do you meeeean?"

"Think about it. It's not that hard to figure out, is it?"

Ashuna grinned self-importantly and pointed at Momo.

"First of all, it's obvious the Faust and Noblesse in this city are colluding. The Faust must be the masterminds."

"Excuse me?" Momo stopped for a moment.

Ashuna smiled impishly, pleased that she'd caught her off guard.

"Since there's a teleportation ceremony set up here, the Faust of Garm must be connected to the summoning in the royal capital, too. I thought you were here in Garm to investigate your own people from the inside, but... Heh. Since you said it was a 'favor' to the church, I guess you're rather naive after all, Momo. Isn't that cute?"

"And what makes you say thaaat?"

"My father—in fact, our entire royal family—didn't have the knowledge or materials to attempt to make this ceremony happen. If it's a question of where they got that technology from, the first guess that comes to mind is that they had supporters in the Faust."

That was true.

Now that Ashuna mentioned it, Momo realized she should have suspected as much right away.

"The cathedral is right next to the former royal castle. Awfully convenient, if you think about it. It puts them in the perfect position to make something like this. I'd imagine there's an underground passage connecting the two."

Since the ancient capital Garm was so far from the royal capital, and it was the archbishop herself who requested the investigation, it had never even

occurred to Momo to suspect the Faust.

“If it’s on this large a scale, the mastermind could even be more powerful than a bishop. Say, Momo. I don’t suppose you’d tell me who asked you to investigate this as a ‘favor’?”

Momo ignored Ashuna.

She stopped recording images in her scripture; her priorities had suddenly been overhauled. In Momo’s mind, there was no benefit in staying here any longer. She had to report this to Menou right away, so she opened her scripture and began conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:4—Invoke [The Lord’s will is relayed through all of heaven and earth, reigning—

“...Tch!”

The conjuring for communication she’d used on the train was blocked, its construction falling apart midway through.

Momo quickly looked around the ceremonial hall, but she couldn’t locate a medium that might be blocking her conjuring. It seemed to have reacted to her attempted spell, but it would be too difficult for Momo to pinpoint the source while conjuring at the same time.

Momo scowled, her scripture still open. Ashuna peered at her curiously.

“Was that to communicate? That’s exclusive to the Faust, yes?”

“Could you be quiet, pleeease? If you could just die and be silent forever, that’d be even better. Thaaanks.”

“Was it blocked just now? Momo. Could you try it again for me?”

Momo’s scowl deepened. She’d been planning another attempt anyway. If that didn’t work, she would leave this place at once and contact Menou from outside.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:4—

Just as Momo felt the interference again, Ashuna spoke. “Hmmm. I’d say it was here, here, and here.”

Ashuna swung her sword at the wall a few times. Just as it scratched through the crests that were engraved there, Momo felt the power that had been inhibiting her communication conjuring disperse.

Invoke [The Lord's will is relayed through all of heaven and earth, reigning far and wide.]

A little surprised at her success, Momo quickly connected with Menou's scripture and relayed a short summary of her discoveries.

Once she'd finished writing out the information with Guiding Force, she turned to Ashuna, who was eagerly peeking at the scripture to observe the process.

"What is it, Momo? No need to thank me. Getting to witness communication up close like this is a rare—"

"Okay. See ya."

"—Hey, now. That's just cold."

Momo didn't bother with a word of thanks to Ashuna as she hastened to leave. She had to run to the cathedral and find Menou. Just as she turned on her heel to head back aboveground—

Guiding Force: Auto-Connect (Conditions Met)—Ceremonial Hall Passage, Crest—Invoke [Ceremony of Descent]

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Primary Red Stone, Inner Seal Conjunction—Invoke [Primary Red, Fury Dragon]

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Original Sin, Envy: Body, Spirit, Soul—Summon [Original Sin, Torsion]

Before Momo's eyes, the black passageway they'd taken to get here began to warp.

It was a trap that had been set up using a conditional activation crest. There were materials and crests embedded underneath the black stone, and they had activated when they detected intruders in the ceremonial hall.

Within the dark passage came the sound of something being born from dark, abyssal conjuring.

“Aha. Here it comes. Well, it makes sense that they wouldn’t allow intruders to find the proof of their transgressions without setting up a few traps.”

For some reason, Ashuna looked pleased as she readied her sword.

It was a makeshift backup weapon. Even though she wasn’t at her full strength, the Princess Knight seemed to be genuinely thrilled at the promise of a strong enemy.

From the sound of it, whatever had been created in the passage was getting closer. There was the almost watery sound of something slithering and a series of dull footsteps that shook the underground room.

Momo and Ashuna surrounded themselves with the light of Enhancement.

“Let’s fight side by side this time, Momo. ‘Yesterday’s enemy is today’s friend.’ An excellent ancient proverb.”

“Oh, all riiight. I want to wrap this up quickly, toooo.”

Two enemies emerged: a hideous stringlike creature that twisted and writhed as it advanced, and a wingless red dragon with loud, clattering footsteps. Both looked far too large for any ordinary human to battle.

“Heh-heh. A conjured soldier in the shape of a dragon and a summoned demon, eh? Excellent opponents. I never thought I would see the like outside the Wild Frontier. And there’s one for each of us—perfect. Which do you prefer? I suspect the demon is more to your liking.”

“I’ll take the dragon. Thaaanks. You can go ahead and get squeezed to death by that thing, Princess Ashy-poo.”

Momo hated Ashuna enough that she wished her dead, but at the moment, they had to work together.

There were two beasts bearing down on them. They had to make quick work of both.

If Ashuna’s guess about the mastermind was right, then the person who was in the most danger right now was none other than the one individual Momo cared about most.

Even Menou had never seen the ceremonial hall Orwell led them to before.

It was in the shape of a dome, perfect for a ceremonial hall. The spherical shape was the closest form to perfection in this world. The spotless white walls were engraved with various crests, but the coating on the walls was special. Even with Menou's extensive knowledge, she couldn't place what materials had been used to render the walls so perfectly white.

There was an altar set up in the center of the ceremonial hall, where more than ten priestesses were preparing for the ceremony.

Generally, any large-scale conjuring that interacted with the astral vein or the Concept Dimension required a large number of people. Menou and Orwell watched the proceedings in a separate area. Sitting on the altar looking bored, Akari occasionally smiled and waved at Menou. She seemed to be quite unconcerned.

Outside the ceremonial hall, Menou gave her a little wave back.

The flower decoration on Akari's headband bobbed gently.

There was a twinge in Menou's chest.

"You two seem to be quite close. It's hard to believe you only met a few days ago."

"Yes, well... That's how she acted toward me all along."

Menou was just as puzzled about Akari's strong attachment to her. Still, she let the matter slide. There was no need to delve into it any deeper.

After all, Akari was about to die.

"I apologize for all the trouble, Archbishop Orwell. I don't know how to thank you..."

"Don't you worry about that. I'm sure this won't be easy for you, anyway."

Menou fell silent at the unexpected response. Now that Orwell had put it into words, she realized the true meaning of the pain that had been pricking at her heart and closed her eyes.

It's guilt.

Ah, I'm so cruel.

The thought buried itself in her chest. Menou had killed people before. Why did she feel particularly emotional about murdering Akari now?

I am the villain.

As Menou sank into silence, Orwell crinkled her eyes.

“There’s no need to compare yourself to that Master of yours, all right? That strange little girl was always anything but normal, for better or for worse.”

Hearing the archbishop refer to her teacher as a “little girl,” Menou was reminded of just how vast the difference in their experience was.

“That girl has always solved everything on her own, but that doesn’t mean you have to do the same. There might be times like this one, when someone else knows of a method that you did not. There’s no shame in accepting help from others; in fact, it’s often necessary to solve a problem.”

“...You’re right, of course.”

“Heh. I have always been curious about you, too, since she took you under her wing. I’m glad we can finally meet like this, not just through a call.”

“I’m humbled you would take interest in someone like me.”

“You mustn’t abase yourself so, Ms. Menou. You are one of the chosen few who bear the burden of a role opposite to mine. I would never take you lightly.”

Without a doubt, Orwell had probably saved more people than anyone else in this city.

It wasn’t just Menou’s hometown. There was also the matter of battling and defending against the looming menace of the Wild Frontier. Not to mention the charitable works that had occurred in this nation under her leadership. She had brought salvation to many others on her road to becoming the archbishop.

Truly, she was the opposite of Menou.

So her words carried all the more weight.

“You are a necessary part of this world. I want you to realize that.”

“...Yes, ma’am.”

Orwell seemed to correctly guess the meaning of Menou’s hesitation, but her

gentle smile didn't waver.

"I hope you truly understand it one day."

Her experience was incomparable. Whenever Menou interacted with Orwell, she was painfully reminded of her own immaturity.

Menou resolved to watch the ceremony all the way to the end. She couldn't look away, even in the moment when Akari died. That was her role—and all that she could do at present.

As she focused her vision, Menou noticed that her scripture was flickering with Guiding Light.

It was a message from Momo. She started to open her scripture, then stopped when she remembered she was next to her superior. It would be rude to read a message in the middle of their conversation.

Instead, she probed the minute changes in the way the energy reacted in her scripture. Messages conveyed in this way were composed using Guiding Force. If the receiver's control over its power was precise enough, they could learn the contents of the message without opening the book.

As Menou read the message from Momo, a wave of shock crashed through her mind. All the different pieces that occurred to her came together to form one conclusion.

"...Archbishop Orwell."

"What is it, Ms. Menou?"

Guiding Force: Connect—

As soon as she finished absorbing the information she'd been sent, Menou quietly charged her scripture with power.

"About the ceremony Akari's going to undertake. You acquired the materials beforehand, correct?"

"Yes. What about it?"

Scripture, 3:1—

Menou had put Akari on the altar by convincing her it was a return ceremony.

She did it because Orwell, in turn, told Menou that it was a ceremony to destroy a Pure Concept. The preparations were going on right before her eyes.

So Menou spoke very casually as she began to conjure deep within herself.

“What sort of ceremony is this, exactly?”

“Oh my,” Orwell murmured. Her eyes went to Menou’s scripture, and she smiled calmly.

“You received a message, hmm? I never imagined someone would find that place and escape from the trap... It seems I overlooked a possible threat.”

She didn’t seem shaken, yet she didn’t deny anything, either. Instantly, Menou was sure.

Orwell was her enemy.

Menou released the conjuring she’d been quietly constructing.

Invoke [And the oncoming enemy did hear the tolling of the bell.]

Guiding Light burst from Menou’s scripture, forming the bell of an artificial church.

It was a powerful attack that sent a clanging blastwave charged with power in all directions. Between its range and intensity, it was not an easy attack to defend against by any means.

Most of all, Orwell wasn’t holding a scripture. There was no reason not to take advantage of that fact.

First, the preemptive strike would suppress the other priestesses as well as Orwell. There might be a crest barrier to protect them, but the ranged attack would stop anyone from moving. Using this as a starting point for her strategy, Menou moved to pile on her next attack.

Orwell moved her hand slightly.

As always, the hand was resting on her cane, which supported her elderly body. When her wrinkled hand shifted aside, it revealed inlaid gems in the head that shone in the three primary colors.

Menou’s eyes widened.

Guiding Force: Connect—Holy Cane, Primary Triad—Invoke [Three Colors, Ten Eras, Hundred Blossoms, Thousand Wars]

Orwell's conjuring instantly crushed Menou's.

The three primary colors mixed together, blossoming into ten colors, then transforming into a hundred shining hues that then formed lines of Guiding Light in numbers that could easily reach a thousand.

The countless colored beams bloomed, crashing against the pseudo-church Menou had created, and destroyed it.

The speed and amplification of the conjuring was terrifying.

Menou could invoke conjuring with her scripture as quickly as any crest, but this was no ordinary skill if it could catch up to hers. The beams of light crushed her bell before it could peal out a single sound, then instantly rained down on Menou. She managed to avoid a direct hit by jumping out of the way, but Orwell's target didn't seem to be Menou herself.

The beams of light pierced through the floor, breaking it open.

"?!"

The ceremonial hall in the underground mausoleum concealed an even deeper underground space. With her footing lost, Menou began to fall.

"Menou?!"

Akari cried out her name from the altar, alarmed by the sudden development.

But Menou could scarcely save herself, let alone the other girl. As she was plunged into empty air along with the remains of the floor that had been beneath her feet, a red streak of light shot toward her hand. Unable to dodge in midair, she could do nothing to stop her scripture from being struck and catching fire.

"Akari, *run!*"

With that short cry, she charged energy into her scripture before it burned beyond use, choosing the best conjuring available from the pages that were still intact.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 13:13—Invoke [The spirit of a martyr is so precious, it is almost foolish.]

The scripture exploded with a violent flash.

It was self-destruction, not intended as an attack so much as a way to maintain the secrecy of the scripture's contents. The implosion made the floor collapse even further. It probably didn't reach the ceremonial hall, but it was certainly big enough to affect the place where Orwell was standing. The archbishop had likely protected herself with the defensive crest in her robes, but as long as she lost her footing and plunged down with Menou, that was good enough.

Akari hadn't been restrained. Menou hoped she would at least have the sense to run away under cover of the explosive distraction.

Gravity dragged Menou down, even deeper than the ceremonial hall where Akari had been at the altar. The hole wasn't especially deep. Before long, Menou landed, and she promptly drew the dagger from the belt around her thigh.

The room she found herself in was a strange test site. In stark contrast with the purity of the room above it, it stank horribly of blood and agony.

The stone cellar contained cots lined up at regular intervals. And lying atop each cot was a young woman.

Draped limply on the beds, they had all had their innards removed. Their heads had been carved open, their empty skulls lolling, and their blood had been drained away, leaving them in an almost mummified state. The young women's eyes were open and clouded, never to show the spark of life again.

In the center of the lab, amid human parts that had been hung from the ceiling, were two giant flasks.

One was a flask collecting the red elements from the human bodies, so as not to waste the materials left over from the experiments. The other contained the remaining dregs of human material that had been separated from the red.

How many human lives had been expended to extract these materials?

The flasks, so big they towered over Menou, were more than half full.

“...I have a long way to go, if I can still be fooled so easily by the promise of help with my mission,” Menou said.

“It would seem so. But you’re still quite young, so there’s no need to let it get you down. The older one grows, the more cowardly one becomes, and naturally one learns how to manipulate the young in the process.”

A beautiful staircase had materialized, leading down from the hole through which Menou had fallen. Composed of the three primary colors, it was substantial enough to support Orwell, letting her calmly and safely make her way to the floor.

Orwell smiled gently. Her compassionate gaze looked the same as ever.

Biting back frustration that she’d been separated from Akari, Menou was forced to confront the truth she didn’t want to acknowledge.

Orwell was the mastermind behind the disappearances she herself had asked Menou to investigate—and that wasn’t all.

Menou’s assumption that the Order of Knights in this town were corrupt had been naive. There was someone far worse who had worked with the Commons terrorists, conducted human experiments, and finally provided the Noblesse the technology with which to summon Otherworlders.

All the incidents Menou had encountered in this nation were the work of the archbishop.

“You’re calm and collected for your age—talented, too—but you lack the caution and cowardliness of that girl—of Flare. Without it, you won’t be a properly frightening Executioner, you know.”

“It pains me to hear that.”

If Orwell, the leader of the nation’s Faust, was part of this conspiracy, then it was no wonder the Noblesse king so confidently dared to attempt a summoning.

If they were going to fight here and now, the biggest problem would be the materials slotted into Orwell’s cane.

The red, blue, and green crystals were rare, prohibited items that should never be in the hands of a holy woman.

“Now then, Ms. Menou. How much do you know about the Primary Color crystals, I wonder?”

“I know they’re made of the three purest colors in this world: red, blue, and green. Part of the Concept Dimension, which was formed by the planet’s powers and human history, these stones allow access to and conjuring from the Concepts of Primary Colors that paint this world. The materials can also express any color in the world through conjuring.”

Orwell’s inquiry was as polite as ever, so Menou responded with the same calm expression.

The Primary Color stones weren’t the only frightening part of this fight. The complex conjuring Orwell had used for her previous attack was executed with dazzling delicacy. Her ability to control Guiding Force, so important in the process of conjuring, was clearly high above Menou’s.

“With those stones, I imagine someone of your level could even create entire conjured worlds, Archbishop Orwell.”

“That’s correct. I’d expect no less of that girl’s pupil. Your knowledge of designated taboos is impeccable.”

Though she maintained her even tone, Menou was anything but calm on the inside.

There was only one reason she could think of that Orwell would have lured them here.

She was after Akari.

More precisely, she wanted Akari’s Pure Concept. Most likely, the ceremony she was trying to perform up in the hall wasn’t to kill Akari. It must be some sacrilegious ritual intended to use her Pure Concept in some way.

“Well then, since you’re aware of the difference in our skill, I would appreciate it if you would surrender.”

“Unfortunately, my Master never taught me how to give up.”

Can I win this? Menou asked herself.

Can I beat Archbishop Orwell?

She was a powerful figure, a genius among the Faust, with an unbreakable spirit, and she'd built up many achievements over time to reach the position at the top. Her very first attack had burned up Menou's scripture, her single greatest weapon, in a matter of seconds. Menou was at an obvious disadvantage. It was in her best interest to retreat.

But as if she had read Menou's thoughts, Orwell chose that moment to charge the cathedral with energy.

Guiding Force: Merge Materials—Cathedral, Church Construction Conjuring Crest—Invoke [Multi-Wall Sanctum Barrier]

The ornate, complex crests in the cathedral activated. The Guiding Force that Orwell had flooded into the walls created a layered, impenetrable barrier that cut off the inside of the cathedral from the rest of the world.

"Now you can be certain that help is not coming, Ms. Menou."

In spite of the fact that she'd just infused a massive barrier with power, Orwell seemed none the worse for wear. Between the speed and accuracy of her conjuring and her vast amount of natural power, enough to create a wall around the cathedral, she was in a league all her own.

Menou's only possible advantage was the fragility of Orwell's aging body. Her legs were so weak that even Enhancement couldn't strengthen them sufficiently. The only way to take her down would be in close combat, but there was no doubt in Menou's mind that the archbishop would have a few tricks to defend herself. It would be unwise to recklessly charge her.

"May I ask your reasons? I assume you funded the summoning in the royal capital as well, yes?"

Menou continued analyzing her opponent's strengths, searching for weaknesses, but inwardly, she was kicking herself with regret.

As an Executioner, she should have realized what was happening. Yet she had carelessly brought Akari right into the heart of heresy.

“Ah, well. I only assisted the Faust to prevent the Order of Knights from finding out about this. When I offered them the technology for summoning, a by-product of my experiments here, they were all too happy to cooperate.”

The Otherworlder summoning in the royal capital had set off this whole chain of events. It was all connected: the multiple ceremonies that were designed to mislead an Executioner and the movements of the Faust that tried to lure Menou into a trap. In retrospect, they had known far too much about the methods of Executioners, whose very existence wasn't even public knowledge.

“I lent a hand to that Commons terrorist group and their little schemes because I wanted them to collect young girls for me. It's always better to have more materials, is it not?”

That explained the Guiding guns the terrorists had on the train, and more importantly, the Primary Red Stone, which required a great deal of conjuring proficiency to acquire and utilize. For the archbishop, who controlled all the churches in the royal capital, it would be an easy feat to acquire and distribute these prohibited weapons...

...all the more so if she was collaborating with both the Noblesse and the Commons.

“The Faust can hardly go about kidnapping people publicly. So in exchange for assisting them, I had them bring the girls to this basement for use in my experiments.”

“...I see. Then you must have had some reason for the terrorists attacking the train, too.”

“Wasn't Princess Ashuna on that train?”

Orwell responded without hesitation, as if she had no reason to hide it anymore.

“Her Highness has always had sharp intuition. When I heard she was coming here, I wanted to ensure she didn't find out about my endeavors, so I attempted to distract her with you instead. I knew she would act if an incident occurred on the train, and as a priestess, you would have to do something about it as well.”

This made sense: Without the terrorist incident, Ashuna wouldn't have run into Momo. And because Menou was aware of the princess's presence, she was forced to act accordingly.

"The timing was perfect, since her father's plans had just been derailed by an Executioner. Knowing Princess Ashuna's personality, there was no doubt she would take a keen interest in such a person's existence. I'm sure it made things much more difficult for you as well, Ms. Menou."

Indeed, the matter of Ashuna had deprived Menou of a valuable resource in the form of Momo. If Momo hadn't knocked Ashuna off the train, Menou's movements probably would have been greatly limited under the princess's watchful eye, too.

Orwell had pretended to help the terrorists and used them as disposable pawns to force Menou and company into a confrontation with Ashuna. Without taking a single step out of Garm, she had guided Menou and Ashuna right into her hands.

"The one unexpected factor was that assistant of yours. I assumed that if she was wandering around investigating underground, she would bump into the princess and start another fight... But since she was able to communicate with you despite finding that ceremonial hall, perhaps they worked together? In that case, I'll have to dispose of the pair of them later, too."

"...How far you've fallen, Archbishop Orwell."

Now that she had all the information, Menou glared sharply at the archbishop.

The polar opposite of Menou, Orwell was supposed to be using her conjuring and position to help people. That was her role as a holy woman—especially as the archbishop.

However, this person, at the very top of the Faust, had sunk her hands so deep into the unthinkable with all these careful plans.

"Unlike me, you're supposed to save people. Why would you do all this?"

"Ah, you don't understand, do you...? I suppose you do nothing but kill, after all. Ah yes. It all makes sense now, Ms. Menou. No wonder you don't know."

Orwell looked at her as if witnessing a child's ignorance of the world.

"You see, when you save too many people, the cries for help get very annoying."

"Wh...?" Menou was speechless.

Orwell continued, unaffected:

"Help us. Save us. Why won't you come to aid us? Why won't you give us more? Make more miracles! Don't hold back! Give us everything! Your time, your power, your entire life! Save us! ...They follow you about endlessly."

She sounded every bit an exhausted old woman as she finished her confession.

"And yet not one of them ever saves themselves..."

Guiding Force: Connect—Holy Cane, Primary Triad—Invoke [Deceit, Hellfire]

Orwell channeled her power into one of the three Primary Color stones in her cane, the Primary Red Stone, invoking a conjuring.

Unnaturally vivid red flames rose up, quickly covering the floor.

"Ngh..."

Menou flinched at the attack created by the primary color.

It was vastly different from any limited conjuring created by crests and scriptures. With the materials and Orwell's advanced control over her powers, it could draw out and manifest phenomena from the Primary Color Concept, one of the dimensions created by the planet's astral vein and human history.

The conceptual flames produced no heat waves, yet if they touched Menou, they would incinerate her to ash, bones and all.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Thread]

Activating the crest, she threw the dagger up to wrap around an ornament on the wall. Then she pulled on the attached thread and jumped, escaping from the crimson flames that licked the floor.

"Heh. Very impressive."

“You...!”

Landing back on the floor once the flames died down, Menou gnashed her teeth in frustration at her lack of options.

Since that first light-beam attack had destroyed her scripture, the only battle-conjuring invocation mediums she had left were the crests on her daggers, to invoke *Guiding Thread* and *Gale*, and the one in her robes, to invoke *Barrier*. She was up against a wall, with no apparent way to win.

Even if she wanted to run, she was trapped by the barrier around the cathedral.

“Hmm, where were we? Ah yes. You asked why I would do all this, didn’t you? My apologies, dear. When you get to be my age, you lose track of a conversation very easily.”

Orwell didn’t seem at all bothered to see Menou avoiding her conjuring. On the contrary, she wore the smile of someone watching affectionately as an energetic child played outside.

“You know, these days, my back aches terribly.”

“Excuse me?”

Menou had no idea what she was talking about.

Your back aches?

What does that have to do with anything?

Whether or not she was aware of Menou’s inner confusion, Orwell lightly patted her own bent back as she continued.

“Every morning when I wake up, my first thought is always ‘Ah, my back hurts,’ you see.”

Menou braced herself, assuming this was a preamble leading to some grand, sweeping reason, but Orwell just carried on with the common complaint of the elderly.

“It’s so painful to get out of bed. I have to borrow the aid of someone younger to get up, and when I take my first step, you can hear my knees creak. Oh, dear

me. It's just terrible. Do you understand? You see, I believe this is the weight of all the people I've saved dragging me down. They're just so terribly heavy."

"What are you saying...?"

"Ah, but of course you don't understand. You are young, after all."

The feeling Orwell was directing toward the young Menou wasn't jealousy—

"I suppose I didn't understand, either, when I was your age. But this is the thing of it, Ms. Menou. In the end, I've failed to become a proper holy woman. I'm just an ordinary person who happened to be able to help others because of my powers. Now that I've reached this frail old age, I finally realized it for what it truly is. That's all there is to it."

—it was pity, for a young woman who didn't yet know the fear of old age that would eventually descend on her.

"But still, since I've saved so many people, I think it's only fair that I should be allowed to kill just as many to save myself now."

Menou silently looked around the room.

In this lab, countless kidnapped young women had been subjected to human experiments, dissected to research the source of their youthfulness, and converted into materials, all so that Orwell could escape aging.

Menou couldn't comprehend that motivation in the slightest. And so she gave up on attempting to guess the old woman's feelings.

"...And that's why you wanted Akari."

The Pure Concept of *Time*. For an old woman who feared her own deterioration, Akari's *Regression* must be incredibly tantalizing.

"How did you intend to use her Pure Concept? That's not the kind of thing anyone can use however they wish, even a distinguished conjurer like yourself."

After her experience brushing against the Pure Concept that dwelled within Akari back on the train, Menou's understanding of this was painfully clear. Even using someone else's Guiding Force was difficult enough.

But naturally, Orwell must be aware of the dangers of a Pure Concept, too.

“Goodness, Ms. Menou. Please don’t misjudge me. Surely you know I’m well aware of the instability inherent to one that’s improperly attached to an Otherworlder. I would never attempt to lay a hand on one directly. How do you think I’ve lived to such an old age? I know my limits very well.”

The archbishop spoke calmly of her own common sense, as if she hadn’t kidnapped young girls and conducted experiments on them.

Then how...? Menou wondered, until it occurred to her.

The ceremonial hall they’d been in before they fell down here.

“That hall above us seems to be the source of your confidence. How were you going to use it to control a Pure Concept?”

“Indeed. Well, it’s actually rather relevant to you, so I suppose I could explain.”

Orwell smiled warmly, as if imparting another lesson on the younger priestess.

“That ceremonial hall was originally created to brainwash summoned Otherworlders, you see.”

“Brainwash...?”

“Indeed. Or perhaps *blanch* their minds would be more accurate.”

The teleportation experiment Momo had found wasn’t actually being used for the summoning in the royal capital.

Orwell had created it for a very different purpose.

“It’s a test site for erasing personalities. It’s intended to wipe a person’s spirit and soul clean, leaving nothing but white. I had hoped that using it on an Otherworlder would mean acquiring their Pure Concept to use as I wished, but it was quite difficult to adjust it to the proper level of cleansing. In one case, even the Pure Concept itself was turned *Ivory*, which was quite difficult to cover up. You’re quite familiar with that incident, though, aren’t you?”

A small smile cracked the corners of Orwell’s lips.

“The Otherworlder who was partly blanched turned an entire town white, as

you may recall.”

The shock that struck Menou was difficult to put into words.

This unexpected revelation shook her far more than the initial realization of Orwell’s heresy. For a moment, her thoughts froze. Her mind went almost completely white. She nearly dropped her dagger, her grip on the handle slackening.

The blade shook in her trembling hand.

“You... For how long?”

“I told you, didn’t I? From the very beginning.”

When Menou managed to choke out a question, the wrinkled old woman smiled mischievously.

From the very beginning.

Whether she wanted to or not, Menou realized with horror just how far back that really went.

Menou’s hometown had turned to white snow, as had her memories of it. Her family, her friends, and the town itself had all turned white and drifted away as one. Menou was all that stayed behind, her heart left so blank, not even sadness remained.

That incident, which Menou couldn’t process as a tragedy despite being a survivor, was all the work of the woman before her eyes.

And for what purpose?

“After some experimenting, I determined that rather than trying to brainwash Otherworlders, it was better to blanch their souls and spirits into pure white, leaving them as Pure Concepts with no will of their own. But even then, an Otherworlder trying to use their power is still a danger.”

Orwell explained the truth plainly.

“That’s where you come in, Ms. Menou. Together, you and Ms. Akari mean something. You have the potential to manipulate that girl’s Pure Concept, right?”

On being told that she herself was meant to use Akari, Menou remembered again the incident on the train.

Menou had no barriers around her spirit and soul. When her hometown turned white, she was blanched almost entirely blank as well. That was why Menou was able to connect her energy to Akari's—and with startling ease, at that. She had avoided touching the Pure Concept on the train, not wanting to expose herself to needless danger, but it was possible that she could have used that as well.

"I believe you could. You survived that white town, reborn as the finest of materials. You can perform the connection with others easily—and under Flare's tutelage, your conjuring has improved to the point where you are now also called Flurette. I have no doubt that you would be able to manipulate her Pure Concept."

Orwell had turned that entire town to white snow in order to create material for controlling Pure Concepts. Material in the form of Menou.

Her target wasn't just Akari. It was Menou and Akari together.

"...Ah, I see."

Menou's mind, which had nearly gone numb, started to churn again.

The doubts she had slowly been building up during the events of the past week began to click into place, one after another.

The Pure Concept of *Null* belonging to the boy she killed without ever knowing his name could have eventually developed into immortality. The only reason Akari was chosen to survive instead was because her Pure Concept of *Time* was more convenient for Orwell's purposes. This also explained why an important figure like the archbishop would take such interest in Menou, a mere Executioner.

Orwell had kept her eye on Menou all this time because she was a necessary ingredient for her plans.

"So you really were behind all of it from the beginning."

"That's right. There was a bit of luck and coincidence involved, to be sure, but

when you spend ten years seizing every small opportunity you can find, eventually you'll achieve the results you want."

Simmering heat began to bubble up from deep in Menou's stomach. She was angry—at being deceived, at being used for so long that it was never even a betrayal to begin with, and at her own foolishness for failing to notice it and revering Orwell all the while.

"I've been waiting for you, my precious material, to grow enough to be able to control a Pure Concept. That is why I prompted the Faust to execute the summoning."

Orwell had patiently, carefully built this plan over a long time. Summoning the forbidden entities known as Otherworlders, luring in the Executioner known as Menou—it was all one small part of a plan spanning over ten years.

"...Heh. From beginning to end, there was only one person who ever doubted me. The Executioner known as Flare."

Menou gripped her dagger more tightly.

Noticing this, the sharp-eyed archbishop smiled in delight.

"Oh my, have I angered you? But why? Why would you get incensed just now? For who? Surely you're not angry over losing your hometown? You don't even have a self, after all. These thoughts you're having now are well after the fact, aren't they, Ms. Menou?"

It all went back to digging up that pure-white day when Menou was reborn into this world.

"You've forgotten everything. It's all been wiped."

Her anger reached a breaking point.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Double Invoke [Guiding Thread, Gale]

Guiding Force: Connect—Priestess Robes, Crest—Multi-Invoke [Multi-Barrier]

Menou threw the blade and sped it up with *Gale*, but it was knocked away before it could reach Orwell.

Orwell had activated the crest in her robes. The multiple barriers that formed were far tougher than the armor of the magic soldier Menou fought on the train. On top of that, Orwell's conjuring speed was far faster than hers.

Menou pulled on the thread to recover her thrown dagger. Orwell chuckled pleasantly, not in mockery of her attack.

"How fitting that you call yourself 'Flurette.' My once perfectly white materials have now taken on far too great a resemblance to that girl."

"That's right. I am a villain, after all."

Expressionless, Menou took a step forward.

After her anger exploded, her mind was strangely calm.

Whatever Menou's own identity might be, whatever Orwell's intentions were, there was only one thing she had to do.

"Using an Otherworlder is categorically prohibited. As is the use of human body parts as materials."

No matter who was doing it or why—none of that mattered.

Menou stared coldly at the heretic before her eyes.

Orwell had sunk to the use of the forbidden. She had escaped even from Menou's Master and run all the way to the very peak of the Faust, the First Estate.

Even so, Menou's mission was unchanged.

"You have committed a grave offense, so I must kill you. That's the reason for my existence."

"Indeed. Come, then, young one. Poor child who could not share the fate of your hometown."

Orwell's gentle smile never wavered. She was touching the two flasks that contained the materials she'd gained from dissecting so many humans.

Guiding Force: Connect—Primary Red Stone, Primary Color Pseudo-Concept [Red]—Invoke [Primary Red, Willful Seraph]

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Original Sin, Pride: Spirit, Body, Soul—Summon

[Original Sin, Turf Creeper]

All the red in one of the flasks began to transform, and the human body parts in the other became a sacrificial medium for summoning.

The red materials formed into an androgynous nude figure with wings. And the shadowy, muddy substance that appeared at Orwell's feet grew eight legs and turned into a sort of chair.

Orwell motioned for the red angel to wait while she lowered herself to sit on the summoned demon. Her hand firmly clutched the holy cane with the three Primary Color jewels.

"Whenever you're ready, dear. I'll go easy on you. I've no intention of taking your life. I'll see to it that you and Ms. Akari serve your rightful purpose."

The heretical leader of the nation smiled softly.

Left behind in the ceremonial hall, Akari's eyes widened.

She was surrounded by priestesses, most of whom had their scriptures out and looked ready for battle.

Unfortunately, the short opportunity Menou created by throwing her scripture had little effect. Akari wasn't experienced enough to run instantly upon being told to do so; while she was still frozen in surprise at the explosion, the other women surrounded her.

"Don't move, Otherworlder. You'll forget everything soon enough."

"Ummm...what?"

Akari barely had any idea what was happening, since everything was moving so quickly, but her instincts were beginning to suspect that she might be in a dangerous situation.

"We know all about your ability. If you can only use *Regression*, then there's no way you can resist."

The priestesses continued the ceremony, keeping close watch on Akari's movements.

The group hustled her along, gathering at the altar in the center of the hall.

Guiding Force: Connect—Ceremonial Altar, Ceremony Construction Conjuring Crest—Invoke [Pseudo-Reproduction: Partial Blanch]

The edges of the ceremonial hall warped and twisted.

It wasn't the walls themselves that had started moving—it was the stark-white paint that covered them. The coating began to gather at the peak of the ceremonial hall's domed ceiling—in other words, directly above Akari and the altar.

Once the white liquid converged on that one point, it began to condense into a single, large droplet.

"This is a fragment of the Starhusk—the floating clouded sphere of the northern continent. Even an Otherworlder can't resist its blanching effect."

"Wait, whaaat?!"

Panic rose in Akari's chest as things unfolded around her. Something crazy was going on, of that much she was sure. Most likely, she and Menou had been tricked somehow. But Akari had neither the mental fortitude nor the means to escape from this dangerous situation.

The disturbingly white liquid overhead trembled and was about to fall, when suddenly...

Guiding Force: Auto-Connect (Conditions Met)—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Release [Regression: Memories, Soul, Spirit]

There was the soundless echo of a clock ticking, and time for Akari alone shifted away from that of the rest of the world. All at once, the unease vanished from Akari's face.

"Hmm? This is... Ah, I see. This is like that time in the cathedral in Garm. And whoa! This is my present from Menou!"

Her attitude completely changed, Akari took off her headband and looked at it excitedly. The priestesses stared at her, confused by her sudden strange behavior.

The ceremony was nearly complete now. As the priestesses observed the proceedings to ensure she didn't escape, a little laugh suddenly escaped from

the girl on the altar.

“Okay, I’m gonna resist now.”

With that, Akari lightly twirled her index finger.

Her opponents didn’t even have time to react.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Suspension]

The conjuring happened as naturally as taking a breath.

The people around her froze in place, illuminated by the Guiding Light emitting from Akari’s finger. Even their breathing and heartbeats ceased, but that didn’t mean they were dead.

Time had temporarily stopped for the priestesses.

However, the concentrated white droplet didn’t stop entirely. It was affected by the suspension of time, but its own order to blanch the target lessened that effect. Slowly but surely, without the normal speed of gravity, it continued to drag downward.



“That thing won’t really stop, huh? I wonder why.”

Unhurriedly, Akari stood up and got down from the altar. The white droplet broke through and fell, hitting the altar where Akari had been moments before and turning the whole thing white.

“Yeah, sorry. I don’t intend to follow anyone but Menou or be used by anyone but her. And most of all... I really, really don’t want anyone but Menou to kill me.”

Akari didn’t even look fazed by the unusual sight as she waved her finger like a conductor’s baton. This time, she invoked a different kind of conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Teleportation]

She was interfering with space, a matter closely connected to time. Akari performed the conjuring with the practiced ease that only an Otherworlder with an intimate understanding of a Pure Concept could achieve.

The priestesses suspended in time had now vanished. Paying no mind to their absence, Akari leaned her head sideways and folded her arms, as if scouring her memories.

“Now, at this point in time...yeah. Unlike the time on the train, there’s no need to turn things back... Hee-hee. I guess the most natural way would be to have Momo let loose.”

Speaking the name of someone who she technically hadn’t met yet, Akari grinned as if she’d hit upon a sneaky idea.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Double Invoke [Teleportation, Weathering]

Two conjurings occurred at once. Akari had called upon them to transcend space, enacting their effects somewhere else entirely.

Akari snickered as she imagined the results.

“Was that too mean of me? I always was a liiittle jealous of those ribbons. It’s no fair, having a memento of their past like that.”

She stuck out her tongue at someone who wasn't there to see it. Then, after this childish display of retaliation, Akari hugged the headband with its flower decoration close to her chest.

"Hee-hee... Lucky me. There aren't many *Times* I get something as wonderful as a handmade gift from Menou. I'm so, sooo happy."

After murmuring to herself, Akari shaped her right hand into a gun, pointing the index finger at her own temple.

"Okay, then. It's all right. I'll just have a sense of déjà vu, like always. And I'll still love Menou! ...So I'm not scared at all."

While Akari spoke quietly as if trying to convince herself, her right hand shone.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Regression: Memories, Soul, Spirit]

The light she'd produced shot into her head.

Once the glow of the conjuring faded, an unharmed Akari blinked a few times.

"Hwuh?"

She furrowed her brow, trying to figure out why she was standing when she'd been sitting just a moment ago. And on top of that, the people who'd been surrounding her were suddenly gone.

"Ummm...?"

While she wondered what had just happened, Akari nevertheless started walking.

She had a feeling she had to go somewhere important.

It was the same thing that had happened on the train. She didn't know why. She just knew she had to do it.

As she ventured farther into the ceremonial hall, she came upon a staircase. For some reason, Akari knew immediately that going down would lead her to Menou.

"Hrmm..."

Akari crossed her arms and thought for a moment.

Menou told her to run, but Akari thought that wasn't really what she was supposed to do. No, it wasn't even really a thought—more of a strong compulsion. Something deep inside her was urging her forward.

“Okay. If Menou's in trouble, I've gotta go to her!”

Coming up with a reason to assign to the impulse, Akari headed down the stairs. She'd surely never been here before, but a strong sense of déjà vu guided her. Although she didn't know where she was going, she didn't hesitate.

She just moved in a straight line toward the place where she needed to be.

“Even if she gets mad at me for coming, I'm just gonna tell her off. I didn't do anything wrong!”

Akari hurried onward toward Menou.

Ashuna's sword slashed sharply, cutting through the demon shaped like a twisted string.

But the creature, which seemed to consist of a tangle of sticky black thread, didn't recoil. The piece that had been cut off turned into a second creature, attempting to attack Ashuna from her blind spot and coil around her.

Ashuna swiftly crushed the offshoot creature without hesitation. Unable to maintain its form, it fused back into the main body.

“Hrmm.”

Ashuna tilted her head elegantly.

Cutting off a piece of the main body made it turn into a being of its own, and when that being was crushed, its remains were absorbed back into the main body. And yet, she couldn't seem to find any kind of core in the enormous, writhing main body of the demon.

“Momo, how do you kill this creature?”

“How should I knooow?”

With a quick glance at Ashuna's battle, still hoping she would be killed by the demon, Momo sliced off another one of her own opponent's scales with her

oscillating coping saw.

Momo was preoccupied fighting a pure-red wingless dragon.

Unlike Ashuna's demon, it didn't have any special abilities—it was just a dragon-shaped soldier that was gigantic and therefore strong. Its enormous body gave most of its attacks deadly weight, but Momo was nimble enough to dodge them all.

Figuring there was nothing to fear, Momo boldly went in for close-combat battle. Her top priority was getting out of this place. She was even willing to foist the dragon off on Ashuna if it meant ending this battle more quickly.

The red dragon, evidently angered by the attacks chipping away at its giant body, whipped its head around to shake off Momo, and it opened its mouth wide.

Guiding Force: Connect—Primary Red Stone, Inner Seal Conjuration—Invoke [Red Flame]

Fire began to form within its mouth.

The flames created by the red Primary Color Pseudo-Concept were as red as a splash of the purest paint. Though they emitted no heat, the flames had even more power to burn than an actual flame might as they licked outward.

I can make it.

Making a snap judgment, Momo estimated the amount of power within the flames and pushed forward.

Guiding Force: Connect—Priestess Robes, Crest—Invoke [Barrier]

Activating the crest within her robes, she stepped into the center of the vortex of flames. Naturally, she focused most on protecting her head as she created the barrier, covering for the thinner areas by strengthening her body's constitution with Enhancement.

Just as Momo had calculated, she made it through the flames in the instant it took for the barrier to burn away—or very nearly.

In that instant, there was a flash of Guiding Light that mingled among the red flames.

The result was a frightful conjuring that weathered the passage of time in the immediate area. *Time* had teleported here from the cathedral before activating, eating through to form two small holes in the defensive barrier that Momo had created around her head.

In the exact areas where her hair was held in place by ribbons.

“...What?”

Just as she was about to cut through her opponent’s nose with her coping saw, Momo suddenly froze in place.

Her hair had come undone.

Normally tied up in pigtails, it suddenly drifted free in the air. As she felt her curls come loose, Momo turned away from the dragon and looked behind her—at the ribbons that had burned up and fallen to the floor.

The two red ribbons she had always worn, the ones Menou had given her.

“Ah...”

The coping saw in her hand fell to the floor with a thud. As Momo stood stock-still, the dragon took this opportunity to attack.

Momo didn’t even try to dodge.

With a roar, the dragon’s massive body crashed directly into Momo’s small frame, crushing her against the wall.

“Oh dear.”

As Ashuna was fighting with relative ease, attempting to figure out how to slay the demon, she heard the crash that shook the underground space and narrowed her eyes.

Well, that must have killed her.

Whatever the reason, Momo had suddenly stopped and stood still in the middle of battle. Ashuna herself was another story, but she couldn’t imagine Momo surviving that situation. *What an anticlimactic end*, she thought, disappointed.

The giant clouds of dust began to disperse. Thinking she could at least bury

her later if a corpse remained, Ashuna squinted into the vanishing dust, but the scene that emerged made her doubt her own eyes.

The enormous red dragon, its mass increased by a huge amount of Guiding Force, was flailing its legs and tail.

“Hmm?”

On closer inspection, this was in fact Momo’s doing. Despite the attack she’d just taken head-on, Momo looked virtually unharmed, even pinning the dragon down by the nose with one hand.

And that wasn’t even the strangest part.

“...Hic!”

Momo was crying.

The tint of the Guiding Light enhancing her body as she cried was deeper and darker than it had ever been before.

Amid the exaggerated sobs of a crying child, there was a dull crack.

It was the sound of the dragon’s nose being crushed into a more convenient shape by Momo’s unnaturally powerful grip.

“Waaah... WAAAAAAHHH!”

In the midst of the intense battle, Momo started wailing in a gracelessly loud cry.

She continued to cry as she lifted the dragon one-handed and whipped it around, causing a massive *whoosh*. The ground shook as the dragon’s gigantic mass crashed into it over and over, but Momo paid it no mind. She bashed the giant dragon every which way, like a child throwing a tantrum with a pillow.

“Why?! Why?! I protected them. I know I did! So hooow...? It’s not faaair. This isn’t... Waaaah! No! No! No, this is all wrooong! WAAAAHH!”

“Er, uh, Momo? We’re underground, remember? If you keep that up—”

“Shut uuup! Go awaaay! Die!!”

“Whoa?!”

Tears still pouring down her cheeks, Momo flung the dragon directly at Ashuna. She managed to dodge it, but the beast crashed into the demon, sending both flying into the wall with a powerful crash.

Knowing full well what would have happened if it had hit her, even the princess felt a chill run down her spine.

Meanwhile, Momo didn't spare a glance at the results of her wild toss. She just dropped to the floor and scooped up the ribbons tenderly.

"Wehhh... Hic... B-but my darling gave these to me. What do I do...? She might think I'm a bad girl wh-who destroys presents... Nooo...it's not faair. Nooooooooo!"

Squeezing the remains of the ribbons to her chest, Momo bawled uncontrollably like an infant.

Crying children were outside the Princess Knight's area of expertise. As Ashuna hesitated in a rare moment of uncertainty, Momo's watery eyes fell on the two monsters trying to extract themselves from the wall.

"Waaah... Waaaah!"

Rage flared in her tearful eyes.

"This is all your faaault! Those were a gift from my darling! They were so precious, so, sooo important to me! Die, die, die! DIIIIIE!"

Momo whipped out her scripture and charged it with energy.

Guiding Force: Connect—

A massive amount of power pumped out of her soul and into the book.

Scripture, 1:4, Full Passage—

Momo continued to draw it out of her very being—more than what ordinary priestesses could ever produce together.

Invoke ["What are you doing?" asked the king. The woman answered, "I am digging a well." The earth was dry. The ground was cracked. Sand was all around. The king thought this strange. There was no water in this ground. Why here, at the end of the world? The king said—

To manifest the conjuring Momo was trying to invoke, the scripture directed the flow of energy deep underground to disrupt the earthen vein. Compared to Menou, who had done something similar for an instant atop a moving train, Momo's control was downright clumsy.

However, the amount of power she was using was exponentially higher.

Ashuna deduced from where the power was aimed what Momo was trying to do, and the color drained from her face.

"W-wait, Momo. Surely you're not—? The earthen vein—"

"I don't care about good or bad."

Momo paid Ashuna's warning tone no heed.

"I hate everything except for my darling. For all I care, the rest of the world can just disappear. Let everything but her fall to ruin. The world would be better off if she was the only thing left."

["—no water will appear. This vein has run dry. The oil, too. There is no peace. No order. What could flourish in this world? What could be planted? What could be found? What is left to be dug up...?"] The woman answered, "It is not—"

The earthen vein thrashed.

Ceremonial conjuring normally required multiple people, but Momo was reproducing it on her own in a short time, albeit on a very small scale.

The section of the vein that passed under the ancient capital Garm bent and swerved toward the surface under Momo's conjuring.

"How? Why? I love everything about my darling. How could you take away her gift to me? I'll never, ever forgive you. Never!"

["—dead. This land is full of power. If I dig deeper and deeper, I will strike upon the light of great power. The truth of this world. The source. Salvation will spring from the ground's lifeblood and into the heavens, connecting all across the—"]

Normally, conjurers would carefully manipulate the power produced by the earthen vein, but Momo's control was not nearly delicate enough.

She simply twisted until it gushed forth. She made no effort to control it, nor

did she want to.

“I hate it all! I hate everyone! I hate this entire! Stupid! World!”

[—sky, and with the light of this planet create a wall that shall surely bring peace to all.” The king believed her. He had not been forsaken. He gathered the people, dug through the earth, saw the light, and knew. Of hope. Of that which connects. Yes—

As she unleashed a conjuring on a far larger scale than one individual, Momo wept and screamed aloud.

“Everyone but my darling should just die!!”

[—the Lord’s will is relayed through all of heaven and earth, reigning far and wide.]

From deep below the earth, up to the surface, the torrent of power that gushed forth from the earthen vein crashed upward, bursting through the entire ceremonial hall.

Directly above where Momo had invoked her conjuring, in the royal castle, an unprecedented panic had broken out.

Part of the castle, which boasted a history of more than eight hundred years, had suddenly been destroyed.

A burst of light from underground had abruptly blasted through it, breaking the part of the castle that was reserved for sightseeing. No one was hurt, since it wasn’t open at the moment, but a throng of people had quickly gathered to see what was happening.

The knights guarding the area flew into a panic, running around trying to find the source. Some of them knew about the ceremonial hall underground and suspected that it might be related, but they couldn’t release that information to the public.

As they ran outside the building to get a better grasp of the situation, the knights gaped in disbelief.

Their very own Princess Knight Ashuna and an unknown priestess were fighting some strange creature.

“Heavens. What a stirring display, Momo!”

Ashuna chuckled delightedly, having withstood the burst of power with simply Enhancement. The blast had left her looking quite a bit the worse for wear, but none of the injuries were too severe.

“Well, after a show like that, I’ll just have to go all out, too! ...Stay back, riffraff! I can’t promise you won’t get caught up in all this!”

It was a mistake to hold back in case we caused too much damage underground, she thought with a grin. If Ashuna got serious, she might actually demolish what was left of the castle nearby, but...

“Oh well. No big deal.”

In the end, it was just an old castle that had become a gathering place for the corrupt. The people inside seemed to have fled already, so annihilating it might even make her feel better, Ashuna reasoned as she charged her blade.

Guiding Force: Connect—Sword, Crest—Invoke [Slash: Expansion]

Ashuna’s energy surged through the crest carved into her sword.

The sheer level of strength was far too much to be contained by a single crest. She was deliberately charging it with excess power. Like Momo’s display of power, this was much more than any ordinary individual should be able to produce alone, and it resulted in a conjuring far more powerful than any the crest would normally manifest.

Momo’s scripture had managed to hold up to the excess Guiding Force and invoke the conjuring successfully, but Ashuna’s sword was only a poor substitute.

Cracks began to appear in the blade, but Ashuna dismissed them, continuing to feed the sword with power. The blade snapped and broke—but it didn’t fall apart.

The light held the broken pieces of the sword together, creating a giant sword far larger than any ordinary weapon.

“Now then, demon.”

As the beast writhed in pain from the force of the earthen vein, Ashuna raised

her shining sword and smiled sweetly.

“Surely even you will die if you’re destroyed without a trace, yes?”

She swung the blade of light.

With its slashing attack expanded, the light sword cut neatly through the demon and scattered it into dust—but that wasn’t all.

The slash of the enormous blade cut diagonally through the half-wrecked castle, delivering the finishing blow.

For a moment, the upper half of the building slid to one side where it had been cut. Then it fell apart under its own weight, and in the next instant, the former royal castle began crumbling into pieces.

“Ha-ha-ha! It sure feels good to cut down history!”

The Princess Knight let out a hearty laugh as she watched the old royal castle fall apart.

When she turned to see how Momo was doing, the girl was still crying.

“Need any help?”

“Do you have a death wish?”

Momo paid no attention to the earth-shaking sounds and dust clouds as the old royal castle fell to pieces, nor did she meet Ashuna’s eyes as she held down the thrashing dragon with one hand.

The castle was tumbling down before them. There was a crowd of people exclaiming in alarm as the historically significant building was destroyed, but for all Momo cared, the whole crowd of them could die, too.

Unlike Ashuna, who was laughing aloud, Momo’s emotions were still in turmoil.

Tears continued to pour down her cheeks as she cursed the world. She held down the flailing dragon with her right hand, clutching the remains of the ribbons in her left.

The only thing more important to her than the ribbons was a single person. Momo was considering punching Ashuna once she finished taking care of this

dragon—when she remembered that she had someone far more urgent to destroy.

This was all the archbishop's fault.

She turned toward the culprit's base and found there was a barrier erected around the cathedral.

Why had she ever held back in the first place? Certain places, circumstances, and obligations had been restraining Momo's spirit.

That was why her ribbons got burned.

Even if she wanted to go beat the source of her problems, the barrier around the cathedral was too tough.

Fine, she thought, and she charged her powers into the perfect weapon that she just so happened to be gripping in her right hand.

Guiding Force: Connect—

Momo's rough intrusion was met with violent resistance from the Fury Dragon.

It was the conjured soldier's automatic defense protocol, designed to defend it from outside influence. Anyone who tried to connect to it outside of the approved means would have their Guiding Force pushed back into them, attempting to crush their spirit and body alike.

Menou had defended herself from this with her scripture.

But Momo didn't have that level of skill.

So instead, she forced her way through with her massive amount of power.

Fury Dragon, Inner Seal Conjuration—

Momo's Guiding Force stamped down the Fury Dragon's thrust and expelled it.

The countercurrent was forced back by even more energy, allowing Momo to break down the energy powering the dragon's core and replace it with her own.

The stored energy that kept the dragon-shaped soldier running was ejected, stopping it completely. The Primary Red Stone ceased to serve as the conjured

soldier's core, forced back into its state as mere materials.

Then Momo used even more of her own Guiding Force to charge the stone and begin conjuring.

Primary Red Stone, Primary Color Pseudo-Concept [Red]—

Momo used the material in her hand to vent her frustrated feelings.

Invoke [False Sun]

The primary color summoned a related Pseudo-Concept: *False Sun*.

It was an unnaturally stark red sun, producing neither heat nor light. The strange, uneven circle that appeared looked like one a child might make with vivid red paint.

All eyes in the ancient capital Garm gathered on the artificial sun that had suddenly appeared.

However, Momo ignored them, including the fascinated gaze of Ashuna. Still choking out sobs, she fixed her gaze on the cathedral.

“It’s all your fault.”

Momo sprinted toward the cathedral, the two-dimensional pseudo-sun still present in her right hand. Her strength and speed still boosted by Enhancement, she bounded over the moat of the former royal castle and took an even bigger leap.

As Momo soared through the air, her eyes fell on the clock tower of the cathedral.

With its eight hundred years of storied history, this feature of the building was considered to be a particularly poignant symbol of the nation’s Faust. Factoring in its cultural value, it was too priceless to describe.

All this meant about as much to Momo as what she’d had for breakfast yesterday. To her, it was of such little importance that she could easily forget about it within a week.

Crying like a child, Momo raised the flat sun over her head...

“Begone!”

...and smashed her raging feelings against the barrier with the fire of a false sun.

Menou was fighting to buy herself time.

Using the two crests carved into her dagger, *Guiding Thread* and *Gale*, she dodged with erratic movements. Never entering the range of Orwell and her demon and angel servants, Menou fought purely to keep at the same distance.

Purely in order to survive.

Her stamina was slowly wearing down, as was her energy supply. Orwell wasn't seriously attempting to attack her, either. Her goal was to capture Menou alive, after all. She just had to wait until the girl ran out of strength and energy.

"...This is ridiculous," Menou grumbled without thinking.

Orwell was certainly old, but she was also a skilled conjurer who had polished her already high natural talents to the extreme. Under normal circumstances, Menou would never fight an opponent like this head-on. She would sneak up on them from behind to attack unnoticed, or feign friendliness to get the upper hand, or catch them in a trap to run down their strength.

However, her enemy had outmaneuvered all of her usual Executioner tactics.

The archbishop used the excuse of requesting an investigation to send Momo away, lured Menou along with Akari into her home territory, and forced Menou into a head-on battle.

From the moment she arrived in this nation, she'd been playing into the palm of Orwell's hand.

Since the cathedral was sealed off with a barrier, she couldn't even run away. But Menou stubbornly persisted, drawing out the battle as best she could.

Even surrounded by enemies, she knew there was one thing she could rely on.

And soon the time came.

Tremors shook the ceremonial hall.

Dust sprinkled down from the ceiling. It wasn't an earthquake but a powerful impact aboveground that had rattled the entire cathedral. Some sort of problem evidently arose in the building's conjuring crests, shutting down the barrier that had trapped Menou inside.

"What in the—?" Orwell started.

"I do have one thing to be proud of, you know."

As the tremors rocked the underground laboratory, Menou interrupted the alarmed archbishop and charged toward her. She was protected by the angel floating at her side, but that didn't matter.

A small smile spread across her lips at the change she'd been waiting for.

Menou heard footsteps coming down into the basement.

"You see, I have the most skilled assistant in all the—"

"Menou!"

"...What are *you* doing here, you ditz?!"

Realizing this wasn't Momo arriving to back her up as she'd hoped, Menou quickly leaped away from Orwell.

It was Akari, of all people. *Doesn't she ever learn her lesson?* Menou thought, absolutely stunned.

"Dammit, Akari! Why are *you* here?! What goes on in that empty head of yours?!"

"Huh? What? Why are you getting mad at a cute girl coming to rescue you?!"

"Because you'll only slow me down, obviously!"

This was the second time she'd gotten in Menou's way mid-battle, counting the train incident. It was only natural that Menou would be taken aback.

"Argh! I told you to run, didn't I?! I knew you were an idiot, but this is ridiculous!"

"B-but I couldn't just leave knowing you were in danger, Menou! It's not right to abandon people. I wanna be nice to you, and I want you to be nice to me, too! So I didn't do anything wrong!"

“Fine, then! Next time I ask you to do something, I’ll put a leash around your neck to make sure you listen!! Happy?”

“Menou! That’s a little too kinky for me! Even if it’s with you, I don’t think I’m really mentally ready for that! Let’s work our way up to stuff like that, okay?!”

“Oh, shut up!”

Their exchange quickly deflated the tension of the battlefield. However, Orwell was so stunned that she didn’t even attempt to take advantage of the moment. The priestesses who had surrounded Akari in the ceremonial hall were trueborn elites. Even with the little opportunity Menou had created, they weren’t the sort who would let their prey escape so easily.

And yet, here Akari was.

“But how—?”

Just as Orwell started to voice her consternation, the ceiling rumbled again.

This time, it was more than just a tremor or two. It was as if a giant were throwing a tantrum aboveground, causing massive quakes one after another. The ceiling of the underground lab shook and began to crack. As Menou looked up, the cracks in the ceiling continued to spread.

BOOM. A low thud shook the ground and reverberated in her bones.

The underground ceiling had hit its limit. The cracks broke open all at once, gaping full of holes, and finally fell apart entirely. The stones turned to rubble as they came down in a landslide, burying the floor below.

Menou and Orwell immediately activated the barrier crests in their priestess robes to weather the cave-in.

“Curses. It’s one thing after another...!”

Orwell’s usually calm face twisted with displeasure at the onslaught of unexpected developments.

Not least of which was a petite girl with fluffy hair kicking her way down through the remains of the ceiling.

Immediately, Menou grabbed Akari and covered her eyes from behind.

“Um, Menou? What’s up? Some kinda blindfolding fetish? Well, I guess that’s not so bad... Yeah, I can handle this. Okay. Let’s keep developing our love nice and steady.”

“I’m not into that sort of thing, so keep your mouth shut, please.”

“Mm-hmm.”

Surprisingly, Akari willingly pressed her lips closed. More important, the backup Menou had anticipated before was finally here.

However, she had broken in far more violently than even Menou was expecting.

She’d made a hole with brute force from the cathedral above all the way to this underground area. She had broken through the barrier. Menou could see through the crumbling hole that the cathedral’s ceiling had been blown off and the bell tower broken.

Menou wasted a moment calculating the damage, then noticed something far more concerning.

Momo was crying.

When Momo was in tears, she lost almost all sense of reason. It would be far too dangerous for her to go on an indiscriminate rampage here. Still covering Akari’s eyes, Menou desperately tried to signal Momo with her own gaze.

Her assistant opened her mouth as if she wanted to say something but then forced it closed with visible effort.

Though she was essentially in berserk mode when she cried, Menou was the one person who could get through to her. This was the primary reason why Momo was still a white-robe and Menou’s assistant, in spite of the overwhelming natural talent that would have otherwise easily made her the equal of any full-fledged Executioner.

“...Hmph.”

Momo sniffled, looking at the way Menou almost appeared to be hugging Akari from behind. Tears streamed from her eyes as she fought the urge to scream out questions, but she managed not to speak out loud so that her voice

couldn't be identified.

She knew what Menou was warning her: She couldn't let Akari see her face or hear her voice.

So she turned her attention to Orwell. And punched the angel squarely in the face as if to relieve her frustration.

"Wh-what was that noise...?"

"Don't worry about it."

The loud, dull thuds, as if someone was doing demolition work with their bare hands, was actually the sound of Momo dragging the floating angel down from the air and beating it into the ground.

Momo's natural store of Guiding Force was incredibly large—so large that she usually suppressed most of it.

Normally, when tapping into this energy, one draws power from one's soul and controls it with the spirit. But in Momo's case, the amount of power in her soul was far too large, so she was careful to draw out only small amounts, lest it throw her spirit into chaos.

Which it had, in this particular case.

Without her spirit to keep it under control, her power was practically spilling out according to her raw emotions. In this state, Momo couldn't stop until she used up all of that energy, so she would probably calm down by the time she finished beating the angel to a pulp.

The problem was that the battle still wasn't over.

"Goodness... This is quite a spot of trouble you've caused."

With the cathedral—her home base—destroyed, Orwell glared at Momo in irritation.

"You certainly are talented, aren't you? But while this girl is frightening...if she's just on a rampage, I'm sure she'll run out of power soon enough. So you are still my top priority, Ms. Menou."

Even without her angelic protector, the archbishop still had the advantage.

She had the holy cane with the three Primary Color stones and the demon she was sitting atop for mobility. The crests in Menou's dagger and priestess robes wouldn't be enough to outmatch her.

On top of that, there was the issue of Akari. Menou could hardly move around while protecting her and covering her eyes.

"Huh? Hey, Menou, wait a sec. Did I actually come at a really bad time?"

"Yeah. Incredibly so." Menou sighed. "That's why I told you to run... Ugh. Why would you come here when you knew it was dangerous?"

"Only 'cause..."

Her eyes still covered, Akari's lips formed into a pout.

"The safest place I know of in this world is at your side, Menou."

For a moment, Menou couldn't respond. She tried to come up with a rebuttal but couldn't find the right words. Finally, she groaned in defeat.

"...You really are an idiot."

"Grrr. You're so mean, Menou! You could've seemed a little more touched by that line, y'know!"

"And you're cheeky to boot..."

Menou sighed deeply at Akari's perpetually carefree attitude.

"But I suppose it's all right, since your face reminded me of something."

"Huh? What, really? So I'm helpful?"

"I'm begging you: Please be quiet for a minute."

"Mmph!"

Menou pulled Akari's head against her chest, keeping her eyes covered with one arm.

It wasn't just so that she didn't see Momo—this entire scene would be poisonous to Akari's peaceful life.

Seeing her happy-go-lucky face had reminded Menou of the incident on the train platform in the royal capital.

She had more crests to serve as invocation mediums than just her weapon and robes.

Menou used her free hand to produce a single coin from her purse, then opened her mouth and put the five-*in* coin on top of her tongue.

Guiding Force: Connect—Five-In Coin, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Bubble]

The coin on Menou's tongue began to produce bubbles.

They were sparkling bubbles of light, intended to entertain children, the very same sort she'd shown Akari and the child on the train platform. The Guiding bubbles were difficult to break and could be moved slightly with the will of the conjurer, but that was all.

They multiplied until they filled Orwell's vision entirely.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Thread]

Menou used what little energy she had left to activate the crest in her dagger, bending back her arm to throw it a short distance.

"Your fondness for diversions is just like that girl, too."

Sitting atop the demon, Orwell easily dodged the dagger, then smiled slightly when she saw where it landed.

The dagger had pierced into a Primary Red Stone that had spilled out of the flask when it was shattered during the cave-in.

"Oh, how clever. You've thought this out quite carefully, but I'm afraid you failed."

"Did I?"

"Now, there's no need to pretend..."

She assumed the bubbles were a distraction while Menou tried to use *Red* via the Guiding thread. Orwell chuckled with amusement at the effort as she had the demon cut through the fiber, but then her expression stiffened.

Menou wasn't holding the other end of the cord attached to the dagger.

She was still covering Akari's eyes with one hand and holding her in place to prevent her from moving with the other. With both her hands occupied, Menou

spat out the five-*in* coin still resting in her mouth.

Then she stuck out her tongue, as if in childish mockery.

The tip of her tongue touched one of the floating bubbles.

They had scattered enough to fill Orwell's vision, but a few among them were stealthily arranged to form a single, continuous path.

"The real trick is over here."

Orwell had assumed the bubbles were just a distraction, but enough of them had connected to create a line, connecting to a different Primary Red Stone from the one the dagger had pierced.

Menou sent power through the bubble her tongue was touching.

Guiding Force: Connect (via Guiding Bubbles)—

Her energy flowed through the bubbles and into the red materials from the flask.

Primary Red Stone, Primary Color Pseudo-Concept [Red]—

The materials made of primary colors were an invocation medium for conjuring from its respective Concept, the way Orwell had used them before. If they weren't infused with anyone else's Guiding Force, then they were nothing more than empty vessels anyone could use.



And while she wasn't on Orwell's level, Menou was a conjurer with skills far beyond her years.

Invoke [Deceit, Hellfire]

It was an artificial manifestation of the flames of the underworld. A violent attack from behind, but a necessary ploy for fighting an opponent this dire.

"It'll take more than that...to defeat me!"

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Turf Creeper, Body—Summon [Original Sin, Flyskull]

Orwell whirled around immediately, sacrificing the body of the demon beneath her to change its form into a new demon through summoning. The demon shifted from a multi-legged seat into a swarm of tiny black creatures, biting back at the flames Menou had summoned, getting burned up but still resisting.

"...Yes, yes. A very clever move. But still not enough."

Orwell turned her gaze from the flames back toward Menou, charging her cane with power.

Guiding Force: Connect—Holy Cane, Primary Triad—

But just as she swiveled to send a nasty conjuring toward Menou and Akari—Orwell found herself face-to-face with a tall priestess with dark-red hair.

"...What?"

Orwell froze. The sudden change in the few seconds she'd been looking away were too unexpected for her thoughts to process, and her conjuring fell apart right before completion.

It was a priestess with hair the color of dried blood. That was who was holding on to Akari. Without a doubt, this ominous figure was the one person who had always been suspicious of Orwell since she turned to the darkness of forbidden activities.

"*Flare?! How...? No, it can't be. Did you disguise yourself as Ms. Menou from the very beginning to get close to—?*"

"You were right about one thing."

The image of Flare wavered like a mirage.

There was a sort of ripple through space, and the red-haired priestess's appearance slowly changed.

When the light fell away, she settled back into Menou.

"I've always loved a good diversion."

"Wha...?!"

The archbishop gasped in disbelief.

Manipulating the particles of light individually to create Guiding Camouflage was a special, advanced technique developed by Flare. People had begged her to teach them on many occasions, but none had ever managed to master it to the point of being able to use it in the field.

Not even Orwell herself.

"But that girl was the only person able to manipulate Guiding Force like that —"

"I'm afraid not. I'm certainly not on Master's level, but I can still use it in battle."

It was thanks to Orwell's knowledge of the Master's personality and the difficulty of her technique that she jumped straight to the absurd conclusion that Menou had been her in disguise from the beginning. Flare was the sort of person who might really do such a thing to deceive the archbishop.

While Menou couldn't keep up her disguise as another person while moving, she could maintain the illusion effectively enough while staying still.

After all, the first technique she had been thoroughly taught was Camouflage.

"It's because I learned this technique that I am called Flarette."

Menou had been thoroughly instructed in conjuring in a bizarre order, unlike any ordinary education. Most important, she'd been wiped clean, such that she could absorb these teachings like a material in herself. It was because of these two factors that Menou was able to master Camouflage, albeit imperfectly.

There was one more factor—the most dangerous of all—that Orwell had

overlooked.

The most dangerous person in the room wasn't Momo, who was beating up an angel; or Orwell, the archbishop who had committed a taboo; or even Menou, who could manipulate Camouflage.

It was the summoned Otherworlder.

Menou wasn't kind enough to tell her opponent the whole truth about her intended strategy. The other tricks were all just to distract Orwell from Akari's existence long enough for Menou to make her actual move.

"Let's go, Akari."

"Kay... Mmn!"

Menou used her Guiding Force to draw out power from the other girl, causing Akari's shoulders to twitch, her body squirming as if being tickled.

This was the real strategy that she had thought of when Akari arrived.

Guiding Force: Connect—

Of course, when attempting to use someone else's power, normally the user and the vessel alike would take damage to their spirit and soul—but not so between these two.

Since her rebirth, Menou was able to accept other people's spirits and souls.

And Akari gave her soul and spirit to Menou with unconditional trust.

Just like on the train, Menou used Akari's magic to invoke a high-power conjuring. Without her scripture, she would have to use the crests in her dagger, but Akari's latent Guiding Force levels far outmatched those of even Momo.

Orwell was still shaken by the Camouflage. That was how threatening the image of Flare was to her. In her current condition, she wouldn't be able to manipulate the complex conjuring of Primary Colors Concepts. She could probably use simple crests, but that wouldn't be a problem. If she used plenty of Akari's power to invoke *Gale* and throw her dagger, she could break through Orwell's multiple barriers.

Menou was sure of her victory until the very next moment.

“Truly a shame, Ms. Menou. You were so close.”

Guiding Force: Auto-Connect (Conditions Met)—Cathedral, Church Construction Conjuring Crest—Invoke [VIP Protection Barrier]

In a flash, the cathedral’s barrier activated, and Guiding Light shined around Orwell, protecting her.

Menou’s eyes widened.

It wasn’t Orwell’s will that had invoked this conjuring. The cathedral’s barrier was constructed with conditions that would automatically activate it. Most likely, the destruction of its outer barrier from an outside attack was a condition to construct an even stronger barrier protecting the most important people on the inside.

This is bad. Menou began to grow nervous.

The powerful barrier that protected the entire cathedral was being concentrated on a single person. Even with Akari’s Guiding Force, Menou couldn’t break through its toughness. She could see this all too well because of her ability to accurately gauge the amount of power in a conjuring.

Menou clenched her teeth. She should have predicted this. She had seen the cathedral’s crests during their first visit. She wasn’t able to analyze all of them, but she did notice there was not only an exterior barrier but one that worked on the interior as well.

She had taken it too lightly.

Orwell smiled triumphantly and began to charge her holy cane at a leisurely pace.

Guiding Force: Connect—

Menou hesitated.

She knew she was about to do something she shouldn’t.

But she had no other options. She had to choose. That was what her Master had taught her.

Making the snap judgment that she had to use a forbidden move if she was going to win, she acted immediately.

Akari Tokitou, Pure Concept [Time]—

Menou delved even deeper into her connection with Akari than she had on the train. Borrowing Akari's energy alone wouldn't be enough to break through Orwell's barrier. So instead, she had to rely on the Pure Concept that was improperly attached to Akari's soul.

Menou's power made contact with Akari's soul.

Then, in that instant, her spirit was plunged into a deep abyss.

There wasn't even any time to resist. Menou's spirit was completely overtaken. The chronology of her consciousness was thrown into chaos, and the Menou of the past and present became impossible to distinguish. She could no longer tell where she was or what time it was. There was no internal clock for her to fall back on.

Naturally, she couldn't conjure in this state. This was a realm no human consciousness was meant to enter.

She had made a gamble and lost.

Menou's consciousness spiraled from the outside world to deep inside herself, drawn into the far reaches of time.

When she opened her eyes, Menou was her younger self, standing in a pure-white realm.

She was a child again, her hair long and unruly. And yet, she held her scripture in her left hand and her dagger in her right.

The liquid dripping from her dagger slowly stained the scenery crimson.

Menou didn't know where she was—or even when. Her sense of time was all jumbled up into one confusing tangle.

Aimlessly, Menou began to wander through the white land.

She had no destination, no sense of direction, and no landmarks to go by. She simply kept putting one foot in front of the other. No matter how long she

walked, there was nothing around her but snow. Her feet sank in with every step, making progress increasingly difficult. She couldn't see anything but endless whiteness. Was she going in the wrong direction, or should she not even be walking at all? Menou had no sense of what was right or wrong, but she pressed on.

How long must she have walked?

Eventually, she turned around and looked back at her path.

Amid the white scenery, the route she had taken alone was dyed red by the liquid spilling from her dagger.

“.....”

Looking back at her red-stained path, Menou was overwhelmed by a terrible sense of emptiness.

Maybe I should die.

The thought came all too naturally.

It wasn't as though she had never wondered whether she'd chosen the wrong path, like her Master had said.

Though she declared that she would become a villain, she was unable to completely detach herself from everything. She boasted that she would dirty her hands for other people's sake, yet she yearned to be a pure, proper, and powerful priestess.

And she continued to kill people.

Looking back at her perpetually contradictory life, Menou slowly raised the point of her dagger to the tip of her neck.

She was swallowed up in *Time*, walking through her own inner world in a strange, suspended state. She kept on walking and walking, but in the end, she couldn't find it.

She couldn't find the town where she was born.

The parents and friends she must surely have had were all buried in unending white. Even the path where she'd trodden over them was dyed a dark red.

If this was all there was, then Menou thought there might not be any worth to her having been born in the first place.

Every once in a blue moon, Menou had this one dream.

The dream was in some classroom in Japan at a school she'd never been to.

Everyone was in different uniforms. There were students in jackets, blazers, sailor uniforms... Even though their clothing clashed, nothing seemed out of place for some reason.

When she entered the classroom, they all stopped talking and looked at her.

The space was warm—hushed with no conflict. Nobody was armed with weapons. Other than dipping into their studies, everyone was free to spend their time however they chose.

When she greeted them, they welcomed her with friendly smiles, chatting about nothing in particular.

She was friends with everyone in the class, and among them was her best friend.

They were very close. There were no secrets between them. It made her happy to see her friend upbeat. And it made her friend happy when she was in a good mood, too. They understood each other because she knew about her friend's tragic past and her friend was aware of her regrets.

She talked with her best friend about nothing in particular as they waited for class to start.

It was a ridiculous dream, of course, and she could never tell anyone about it.

But when she killed someone and had that dream, the next morning, she always wondered: *Maybe if I died, I could go to that classroom, too.*

Menou was about to draw the blade of her dagger across her carotid artery when something happened.

"It's all right."

Someone else's hand stopped hers.

She looked up in confusion, and somehow, she locked eyes with Akari.

Without Menou realizing it, the white world around her had vanished. Noticing that she was now somewhere completely different, Menou looked around.

They were inside a building. There was a blackboard in the front decorated with chalk doodles, rows of desks and chairs worn down from long use, and the gentle light of dusk streaming in through the windows.

Menou had never seen this place before. Yet for some reason, it felt incredibly nostalgic.

Standing in a Japanese classroom, wearing a sailor uniform, Akari looked at Menou as if she knew everything about her and gently pulled her fingers away from the blade she was pointing at her own throat.

“It’s all right—don’t worry. No matter what happens, no matter what anyone says or does, whatever *Time* it might be...”

Akari’s serious tone was a far cry from the carefree girl Menou knew, and she spoke with absolute certainty.

Taking the dagger from Menou and tossing it aside, Akari hugged Menou tightly and murmured a promise in her ear.

“I will always be your best friend, Menou.”

The blade clanged against the floor.

Menou’s eyes opened.

Her consciousness was pulled back to reality. The reins of her spirit, which had been swallowed by the Pure Concept, had returned.

And almost no time at all had passed.

“...Right.”

She closed her eyes for just a second, then opened them again.

Of course she couldn’t find anywhere she belonged in the dreamworld. She’d lost her hometown along with her memories of it, but she had still started walking. Her young self, standing in the midst of that white land of salt, had looked up at her red-haired Master and made a decision.

Her reason for living, the place where she belonged—all that lay right in her arms.

She was an Executioner, existing solely to destroy forbidden entities.

Akari had lost consciousness, perhaps because someone else had touched her soul. Menou squeezed the unconscious girl tightly and whispered quietly in her ear, only because she knew she couldn't hear her.

“Thank you, Akari.”

Shaking off her uncertainty, Menou fixed her gaze on Orwell.

The archbishop had already finished preparing her attack conjuring, pointing her cane at Menou and Akari.

Orwell was a heretic who had stained her hands with the unthinkable in order to flee from old age. Now that she had drawn out Akari's Pure Concept, Menou launched an attack that would be a fitting death for the elderly woman who longed for youth.

Invoke [Aging]

Invoke [Colors vivid, hues of paradise, all tints and shades]

Menou used Akari's Pure Concept to invoke a conjuring and send it directly toward Orwell.

At the same time, the archbishop launched her own attack from her cane.

It was dazzling and destructive. Though the archbishop's had begun second, it smoothly shot out in technicolor, draining the hue from everything it touched and destroying it.

But the Pure Concept of *Time* rejected the Concept of Primary Colors.

It didn't even have a moment to resist—there was no contest whatsoever. The pure-white Guiding Light that shot from Menou and Akari swallowed Orwell's attack entirely. Without losing even a fraction of its speed, the Pure Concept sped straight onward, breaking through the cathedral's barrier, which was protecting the archbishop.

The Guiding Light that the two of them produced together landed a direct hit

on Orwell.

“Ah...”

Orwell’s body began rapidly aging at once. Her already-wrinkled skin lost all moisture and began to crack, her muscles atrophied in seconds, and her legs gave way, forcing her to crawl on all fours.

“Aaaah...no... I was so clooose...!”

Dragging herself along the ground, the dying old woman reached out toward Menou.

“I’m not...like you. I have...killed no one...saved so many...and so...I must live... I deserve...”

“Archbishop Orwell.”

As the elderly woman clung to life, Menou held her dagger to Orwell’s forehead as their gazes met.

“With all that ambition of yours, with your goal right in front of your eyes... Why didn’t you use your scripture?”

“Ah...”

The scripture was a priestess’s most trusted weapon.

Certainly, the Primary Color stones were a formidable weapon, but if Orwell had combined that with the multipurpose conjurings possible through the invocation medium, surely she could have backed Menou into a corner she couldn’t have escaped from.

She had summoned demons, created angels, and controlled the primary colors, yet from beginning to end, Orwell had never once used her scripture.

“Ah yes... Heh. Indeed.”

Suddenly, the stubborn determination fell away from Orwell’s face.

“I thought I had to cast it aside, I suppose. At first, I took up the scripture because I wanted to be the kind of person who helps others, you see. But somewhere along the way, that morphed into an oversized ego. The cries for salvation clung to me and ate away at my heart.”

She had saved so many people. She tried to hold on to her faith as a priestess, but she aged and rotted, unable to completely withstand the heavy weight.

In her search for truth, the one person she could not save was herself.

“I thought that if I cast aside everything I believed in, everything that was right and beautiful, perhaps I could find a way to live. I hoped to understand the meaning of my life, something I couldn’t grasp in a life that was purely righteous... Say, Ms. Menou.”

No longer crawling, Orwell chuckled one final time.

“Since your life is so opposite of mine, perhaps you know the answer?”

“...I don’t know.”

Menou couldn’t possibly understand.

From the very beginning, she had never examined her way of life.

She had always simply killed people for the sake of others.

Orwell smiled faintly.

“I see. Well, I hope you’re able to find what I could not. In fact, I’m sure you will, though I hate to admit it. Keep on walking so that you find it someday...”

As she slowly but surely faded into death, the archbishop, who had gone so far as to kill people in order to escape aging, quietly imparted her last words to Menou.

“You’ll find...your way of life.”

With that final blessing, Orwell breathed her last.

All that remained was the withered body of an ancient woman, dressed in the pure-white robes of a bishop.

A little ways away, Momo ran out of strength to keep punching the angel-shaped soldier and collapsed. She didn’t seem to be seriously wounded. After a good night’s rest, she should be able to move again just fine.

It was over.

Once she confirmed that everything had ended, Menou leaned back and

looked up at the sky.

They were underground, but light streamed down on them from above.

The Guiding Light of the astral vein that protected Garm shone through the hole that led aboveground.

Mysteriously, the beam was centered directly on the archbishop's body.

“.....”

Menou took a single step back—away from the light and into the shadows.

That was where she belonged.

As she stood in the darkness where the light couldn't reach, she offered a prayer for the departed.



They were in a sheer-white field as far as the eye could see.

It was the purest island in all the world, without a single scent in the air, and devoid of any life.

The entire ground was made up of nothing but white crystals, which would never decompose.

"I'm sorry."

For some reason, after coming this far together, her traveling companion apologized.

Unable to stand any longer, she had fallen forward, though there was no scent of blood.

"I thought I could save you at the very least... But I should've known I couldn't outsmart Master."

Akari tried to use her powers to *Regress* time, but the girl's wounds would not heal. Slowly, starting with her fingertips, the girl began to fall apart.

Her wounds were turning her body into sand.

Even so, Akari kept invoking her power. It was the only technique she knew how to use.

There was nothing else she could do for her.

"I'm sorry for deceiving you."

She had deceived her. Akari had been deceived.

Upon hearing this, she felt incredibly sad.

At first, she couldn't open her heart to this girl. She was so frightened by arriving in an unknown world that even when this girl reached out a hand to her, she didn't know how to respond, and she always stayed on the defensive.

She was so caught up in thoughts of Japan that she didn't pay attention to the world she was in now.

"I was trying to kill you, you know."

"Then why?!"

Their journey together had often been hard, but lately, it had also been fun.

The girl kept talking to Akari despite her defensive stance, kept smiling at her. Eventually, she found herself smiling back.

Maybe this world wasn't so bad after all.

When they were together, Akari found herself thinking that, just a little. It was a small confession for now, but she thought it might slowly grow over time, until perhaps one day being in this world with this girl would feel normal.

But she had been deceived.

That was terribly sad.

But if anything...

"You should've just done it, then, if that's the case. You should've just killed me! Why would you go and do something like this instead...?!"

"Not a chance. This was the first time I thought... The first time I knew..."

As Akari's tears dripped onto the salt, the other girl gave an almost satisfied smile.

"...about friendship."

Her words were soft and affectionate.

"Ah, I should apologize to Momo... I've put that girl through so much hardship... I'd like to save her, at the end, but..."

A little distance away, a girl whose hair was tied up in ribbons was wrestling a woman with dark-red hair.

She was screaming and crying shamelessly, swinging her fist at the priestess with the frightening blood-colored hair.

This girl's arm, too, had already turned into salt, crumbling away. It was eating

into her body at her shoulder, but she didn't even spare it a glance, continuing to fight as she cried.

"I guess that's impossible, too. I never managed to accomplish a single thing in my life."

Now injured beyond all hope of recovery, the girl closed her eyes and smiled quietly.

"But I suppose it's a fitting way for me to die."

With that, the girl's entire body turned to salt.

"Aaah..."

When Akari touched her, her brittle body fell apart. It crumbled into whiteness, merging into the salty ground.

"Waaaah... Aaaaaaah."

"Hah. Dead, is she?" The red-haired priestess spoke.

It seemed that the battle was over. Akari looked around for the girl with the fluffy pigtails, but her body had already become one with the surrounding sand and was nowhere to be seen.

All that remained was the ribbons she'd defended to her last breath, fluttering in the air.

"Bah-ha-ha. I had rather high hopes for those two...but in the end, I'm the only one left. Well, that's fine."

The red-haired priestess, whose name Akari didn't even know, raised her white sword.

It was ivory, delicate, and more terrifying than anything else in this world: the Sword of Salt.

As she watched the blade close in on her, with no way to defend herself, Akari wished from the depths of her soul.

If it was going to end like this... With that girl gone and her assistant dead and Akari herself being murdered by some unknown priestess...

"Now, screwup of Time."

Then Akari wished she could have at least been killed by her—by Menou—instead.

Just as the Sword of Salt was about to touch her—Akari's heartfelt wish, her desire, overtook her soul completely.

When she woke, Menou was peering into Akari's face.

"Oh, you actually woke up on your own today. Did you remember me telling you yesterday that we had to be up early this morning?"

She must have been about to try to wake Akari. Menou nodded, looking impressed.

Akari sat up and rubbed her bleary eyes, blinking a few times. Dragging herself out of bed, she silently pulled Menou into a hug.

"...What is it? Are you still half-asleep?"

"I dunno."

Menou looked perplexed, unsure how to react to Akari suddenly embracing her first thing in the morning.

Akari couldn't blame her for being confused, but she didn't want to let go.

She felt like she'd been having a strange dream. Though she couldn't remember its contents, she suspected it was terribly sad.

She wasn't sure if the dream was the reason, but she was so happy that Menou was alive, she couldn't help herself.

As Akari squeezed her soft body and savored its warmth, its firmness that didn't crumble under her touch, it all felt terribly priceless to her.

"I dunno, but I really love you, Menou."

For some reason, she felt like she had to convey those feelings—loud and clear this time, without holding back.

"...Er, thank you?"

Menou tilted her head, obviously confused.

Three days had passed since the disastrous incident.

The veritable symbols of this proud city—the former royal castle and the cathedral—had been destroyed in the span of a day.

Officially, the story was that a dragon and a demon from the Wild Frontier had invaded from belowground, and the Princess Knight Ashuna, who was visiting the city, defeated them, along with a nameless priestess.

It made sense, considering the circumstances.

It was bad enough that the top brass of the Faust and the Noblesse were connected with a Commons terrorist group. Most of all, they couldn't reveal the archbishop's deviant activities to the public. They kept attention on only the most visibly evident disasters and announced that Archbishop Orwell had been killed in the battle.

The death of this great holy woman was widely mourned.

The mystery of the quiet disappearances of young women officially remained unsolved—but it was promised that no more incidents would occur at the hands of the same perpetrators.

Menou and company were placed under house arrest while the aftermath was dealt with, but after three days, they were finally allowed to depart, so they had prepared accordingly.

After waking Akari, Menou slipped out to visit the hotel where Momo was staying.

Originally, Menou was supposed to leave the nation's borders alone; but since she hadn't been able to kill Akari in Garm, she had no choice but to bring her along on the journey, changing their plans significantly.

She needed to have a meeting with Momo about these plans, but in the past three days, Momo hadn't shown up once, despite her usual habit of unsolicited visitations. Thus, Menou went to see her herself.

Menou knocked three times. There was no response, but she sensed a presence inside.

She put her hand on the doorknob and pushed gently. Apparently unlocked, the door opened easily.

“Momo? I’m coming in.”

Though concerned by the lack of response, Menou entered the room.

Momo was sewing fervently, in totally silent concentration. She didn’t even seem to notice Menou’s arrival.

Menou walked over and gently tapped her shoulder.

“Momo?”

“...Ah.”

Finally, a reaction. Looking up with a little gasp, Momo stiffened when she saw Menou. Strangely enough, there was even a note of fear in her eyes.

“D-darling...”

“Yes, that’s right. Remember me? ...What’s the matter?”

Momo seemed uncharacteristically nervous. Taken aback by her strange state, Menou then noticed the biggest change of all.

She had obviously been awake for a while, yet Momo wasn’t wearing her signature pigtails.

“I-I’m sorry. The ribbons you gave me...”

With her fluffy hair hanging loose, Momo bit her lip and continued in a whisper.

“...Th-they got...burned.”

Her voice trembling as if she might cry at any moment, she looked down at the charred remains of the ribbons.

Evidently, to Momo, playing a part in the destruction of the former royal castle and bringing down the cathedral’s bell tower were insignificant matters compared to the loss of her ribbons.

“I—I thought...I’d try to fix it...but it’s impossible...”

Her faltering explanation was a far cry from the usual lilting tone with which she glossed over things.

She appeared to be trying to connect the charred remains of the ribbons with

thread, but since the majority of the length had been incinerated to nothing, it was clearly impossible.

She trembled, as if she'd committed a horrible sin.

"Momo, sit over here."

"A-all right..."

Even in her uncharacteristic state, Momo obeyed Menou immediately.

Once her assistant sat in the chair, Menou stood behind her and took out the two scrunchies she'd made when she went sightseeing. Clearly, Momo hadn't been taking very good care of her hair the past few days. Gently taking her assistant's soft, messy locks into her hands, Menou brushed out Momo's hair and arranged it into pigtails.

It was certainly a bit sad that the ribbons she'd given her when they were children had burned, but Menou would never blame her for that, of course. Knowing how hard her assistant had worked, she smiled at Momo in the mirror.

"You look very cute."

Tears pooled in Momo's eyes.

"Darling..."

"What is it, Momo?"

"Why do you...always give me what I want...exactly when I want it...?"

"Who knows? Well, maybe because you're my assistant."

"I love you."

With tears streaming down silently, Momo turned and wrapped her arms around Menou. As she cried, she clung to her with all the strength in her small frame.

"You're the one thing I love in this whole world."

"I know, I know. You're still quite the crybaby, Momo."

Menou gently wiped away her junior's tears and stroked her head softly.

"I'm sorry I can't give you anything better."

“It’s perfeect.”

Momo raised her head.

With her usual syrupy tone returning, Momo broke into a smile, her eyes still teary.

“Your Momo’s a simple girl. A gift like this is enough to cheer me uuup.”

“You shouldn’t say that about yourself.”

Patting her cute, cunning assistant on the head, Menou smiled wryly.

Once Momo’s mood recovered, the meeting went quickly, and it didn’t take long before Menou and Akari ventured to the outskirts of Garm, standing before the wall of light that towered over the city.

It was the protective barrier that separated the inhabited area from the Wild Frontier. There was a stone gate for people to pass through, which Orwell had constructed entirely on her own.

“Urgh. Once we pass through that gate, the pilgrimage begins, yeah?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

After her strange behavior that morning, Akari was back to her normal self.

Menou chuckled but still maintained her focus.

On this planet, there were few human-inhabited territories large and stable enough to be known as “nations.” The threats of violent monsters and demons, conjured soldiers and biological weapons left behind by ancient civilizations, and most of all the scars of Human Errors caused by Otherworlders had rendered many regions uninhabitable.

Since humans barely managed to survive and build nations due to the looming threat of the Wild Frontier, there were no two nations that bordered each other. Outside of each nation’s border loomed the large and impenetrable land, and only the pilgrimage route linked human territories to one another.

“As I explained before, it’ll be a journey of at least three months to reach the residence in the holy land.”

“Riiight. Walking on this pilgrimage thingy for weeks on end sounds pretty

tough. You sure we can't just catch a ride on a train?"

"Sorry, but no. There's no line that goes straight there, and we don't have the budget anyway."

"Gotchaaa. Okay. I get that, but I dunno if I wanna sleep in a big huddle in an inn..."

"I'll be with you, so try to bear it."

"...Yeah! You're right. As long as you're with me, Menou, I can put up with just about anything!"

As soon as Menou reassured the complaining girl, Akari quickly perked up again. Noting that she was learning how to control Akari, she looked up at the white stone gate that marked the beginning of the pilgrimage.

There was a single verse engraved there.

The gate is open to anyone.

To the sick, and to the healthy.

To the fortunate, and to the unfortunate.

To the lazy, to the diligent, to the wise, and to the foolish.

To the faithful, of course, and to the heretics of all kinds.

This holy gate is open to the pure of heart and the evil of nature...

It was the essence of the pilgrimage, which was also written on the first page of the guidebook. When one completed the journey, it was said that one would be cleansed of all sins and born anew.

Menou knew that her sins could never truly be washed away, but she still had a fondness for this illogical verse.

She reached out and touched the stone gate. Running her fingers along the carved letters, she thought of Momo, who had already gone ahead to the Wild Frontier.

On the train to Garm, Menou had experienced a strange sensation. Momo felt the same thing and told Menou her theory that the source was a conjuring from Akari that had affected the time of the entire world.

Even if it were true, it would naturally be impossible to prove, but Momo's theory was probably correct.

Because if so, it would explain a lot of things.

Akari's trust in Menou might even be because she had used her powers to come back from a time far in the future.

In this theory, she wouldn't retain her memories from the old future when she returned to the present. That much was certain. Menou knew not only because of Akari's behavior, but because she had used Guiding Force to touch her very soul and spirit.

Surely no one would put their utter faith in someone who they knew was trying to kill them.

Most likely, vestiges of Akari's fondness for Menou from the future had remained after her *Regression*. Menou must have fooled the future Akari so much that she'd earned her unconditional trust, yet somehow failed to kill her, allowing her to *Regress* instead.

Which meant that Menou had to proceed with even more caution.

This time, she would proceed with the assumption that failure was a strong possibility, and she would still earn Akari's trust while carefully finding a way to kill her without letting her manipulate time.

"Yeah. Make sure you kill me for sure this time."

For a moment, Menou thought she felt the presence of a strange conjuring.

"...?"

She looked around but didn't see anything strange. Even if the Guiding Light that indicated a conjuring were visible, it would be impossible to spot them amid the sparkling of the astral vein barrier.

"C'mon, Menooou. Let's go! We'll take the first step together, on the count of three!"

"...Oh, all right. Fine."

Smiling at Akari's childish request, Menou obligingly walked over to stand by

her side.

This journey from Garm to the holy land was a perfect parallel with the journey that young Menou had walked with her Master, tracing the path along which she formed her identity.

It really did feel like a journey to rebirth.

Looking out at the path that she was about to tread once again, Menou remembered something her Master had said to her when she was young.

“You’ll absorb everything I am with that blanched-white soul and spirit of yours. And if someday it’s all broken down by happiness, and you still manage to survive...well, then you’ll surpass even me.”

It was the first goal that was given to her before her training as an Executioner truly began. Most likely, Menou would never make those words reality.

She had killed too many people to be granted happiness in her life. Reborn as an Executioner, Menou could no longer live for anything but killing other people. The only happiness that would satisfy Menou and break down her existence as an Executioner would be a blade one day taking her life.

On the off chance that she would be blessed enough to be forgiven all her sins one day and surrounded by kind people, like in the classroom she sometimes saw in her dreams, and if she was lucky enough to be granted the happiness of a best friend who would accept everything about her, she probably wouldn’t be able to go on living.

Menou was certain the person who would forgive her would be the cause of her death.

At the same time, she could not help but yearn for it a little.

If she could find the happiness of an encounter that would be wasted on a villain like her and die as a result, then she would want nothing more. If she could meet her end with a satisfied smile... It was a selfish desire, but she still wished it, deep down.

Standing at Akari’s side, Menou looked at the other girl’s face in profile.

Akari noticed her gaze and broke into a huge grin.

“Okay, let’s go together. On the count of three!”

“All right, all right.”

Menou responded with a small smirk to the carefree smile she’d grown so accustomed to, and they counted down and stepped forward in unison.

“One, two, three!”

The two began a long, long journey—for one girl to kill the other.





AFTERWORD

We're happy to announce a major bump in the cash prize for the 11th Annual GA Bunko Awards! First-place winners will win 1,000,000 yen, and grand-prize winners will be awarded a whopping 3,000,000 yen!

Rewind to a certain day in April—a whole year before the end of the Heisei era. I was searching for a place to submit my finished manuscript when I saw the news.

“Whew... Three million yen, huh?” I thought to myself. “Guess *GA Bunko* never plans on awarding anyone the grand prize ever again.”

I didn't stop there.

“If they're giving the old cash prize to the first-place winner, I guess they're trying to say it's the basically the new grand prize. I get it. I mean, there's never going to be another *Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?*”

Even when the winners for the first round were announced, I remember having the following conversation with a friend.

“I placed in the first round of the *GA Bunko Awards*! I haven't checked the details, but... What? Oh, the grand prize? Yeah, I can't imagine anyone winning that.”

Who would have thought this very person would be congratulated on winning the grand prize in mid-April at the start of the Reiwa era?

I would like to issue a formal apology for my unfounded assumptions. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined the tables turning on me. I promise to not read too deeply into things anymore. I'm going to live my life with a little more optimism.

Now that that's out of the way, hello!

I'm Mato Sato, the grand-prize winner of the 11th Annual *GA Bunko Awards*.

The concept of this story was “a grimdark, chic, spy-action fantasy with female protagonists.” That's right. It's just everything I personally enjoy. While I

was writing, I kept saying to myself, “Not grimdark enough...! I’ve got to make it even cooler!” I pushed the limits of my imagination. *Break, my synapses!*

This mash-up of my interests ended up winning the grand prize. I guess you can never know what’s going to happen in life.

I’d like to fill the rest of the pages with my words of gratitude.

To my editor, Null:

Every meeting over coffee brought the initial manuscript closer to completion. I love to randomly sprinkle in characters who add absolutely nothing to the plot, so I can’t wait to see you suffer even more. By the way, was it a coincidence you tightened the deadlines as soon as I won the grand prize...?

To Fujino Omori, who kindly provided the blurb on the bellyband.

Thank you. As a megafan of *Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon?* I was moved that you took time out of your busy schedule to write this. Your blurb practically gleams across the golden bellyband!

To nilitsu:

Thank you for the beautiful illustrations.

I saw how Null dropped extra work on you as soon as we knew this won the grand prize. I thought our editor was damn coldblooded, but I couldn’t put a stop to it...because I was pumped to see more of your illustrations. I’m sorry for sucking... It makes no sense how we’re somehow expected to meet the same deadlines after we’re assigned more work...

To everyone involved in the creation of this book.

Not just the editorial department, but sales, publicity, and everyone who works at the bookstores. I could absolutely feel all of you helping to push this title on all fronts. Thank you. Your enthusiasm was scary—I mean, just wonderful. I can understand why people say things like “*terribly grateful.*” I want to formally extend my gratitude to you.

And to the readers who picked up this book:

I hope I lived up to the expectations and hype as the first grand-prize winner in seven years.

I'm positive everyone will have a different opinion about this book. Just as a story is one in a million, so, too, is your experience taking it in. If you'd like to share your thoughts on Twitter or other social media, I have a sneaking suspicion the author might see them. Please feel free to write letters, too. We love to read them. I've heard they can top us off with creative fuel.

Nothing would make me happier than knowing this book brings joy to those involved in this series.

“I’m
allowed
to die in
this world.
I’ll never
become
like you.”

Onward to the port
city of Libelle...

...where evil lurks
in the fog.

The
Executioner 2
and Her Way of Life

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